イラスト / 真早

My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister are Looking Over at me Like They Want to Join In…in Reality Though

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Chapter 0

[Search Engine] Definition Confirmation [Absolute NOAH]

1. A life form that has surpassed the limits of known biology and has a lifespan either infinitely or immeasurably long.

2. A life form created from or by a human.

3. A life form that's individual traits present a risk of spreading to or infecting unrelated people around it.

The conditions change depending on the environment and situation, but those are the fundamental definitions of an Archenemy.

The term Archenemy itself refers to Satan in a certain monotheistic religion and from there came to mean any sort of "demon lord" in general.

Synonymous terms are the undead, the living dead, and the immortal.

Vampires and zombies are the representative examples Archenemies in modern times.

Part 1

It was a refreshing moonlit night after the city's air pollution was swept away by an out-of-season storm.

I was holed up in my room, curled up on the floor, and pressing my back against the inside of the door.

I had a simple reason for this.

Knock knock! Knock kno-knock knock knock!! Knock knock knock knock!

"Satori-kuuun? Your big sister would like to speak with you. Specifically, we need to discuss what happened to the limited melon bread from Asamiya."

"I know, right? They only make 20 a day and don't take reservations, so it's super rare. Onee-chan and I were arguing over who got it, but then it just up and vanished."

Tremble tremble!!

I hadn't known.

I really hadn't known that was holding everything together here. All I did was trudge home through the rain and realize something smelled great when I set foot inside our house. And then that golden glittering prize was just sitting there! Of course I was gonna eat it!!

This was really bad. What was I going to do? My older sister Erika was a vampire and my little sister Ayumi was a zombie. They were known as the undead or Archenemies, which made them something like an RPG's hidden boss. I was in real trouble if they were angry. They wouldn't even need a fist to break through the plywood door; a karate chop would be enough to break right through! And then they'd drag me out!

While I trembled in fear, my smartphone buzzed in my pocket.

I pulled it out and checked the screen (to distract myself from reality) and saw Maxwell speaking through an SNS speech bubble.

However, Maxwell was not an international friend or a classmate with a cringe-worthy screenname.

This was the system management agent for the Maxwell disaster environment simulator.

"What is it, Maxwell? I'm kind of busy."

"Sure. And that is why I am contacting you. I determined you needed this system's assistance since you stepped in it and have no way out."

"Y-you mean you'll make full use of the simulator's processing power to calculate out a way for me to survive Erika and Ayumi's double punch!? That's almost too good to be true!"

"No. I have calculated 8.6 trillion different scenarios and each and every one of them ends in failure."

"So all I know is that I'm really and truly doomed! That's a disaster environment simulator for you!!"

"However, I have detected a single unknown variable. It is a possibility of unknown impact, but it seems better than any of the

options with a 100% chance of failure."

"…In other words, there's almost no chance of success this way either?"

"Sure. It is like the difference between a suspension bridge just about to snap and one that has already fallen."

I mussed up my bangs with a hand while still leaning against the door.

I really had understood this wasn't a problem that would solve itself with time. In fact, my sisters' anger would only grow the longer I put it off. My best option was to immediately open the door and bow down in apology. But I was scared! If I prostrated myself before them, they might just crush my head underfoot!! I mean, my older sister was a vampire queen and an extreme S!! The defendant requests time for the lay judges to cool down!!

"I guess I just have to go for it. Okay, Maxwell! What exactly do I have to do?"

"Sure. Turn your smartphone's voice input option on and lower your privacy protection settings to Level 2."

"?"

"User, I am asking for permission to borrow your 'voice' to speak."

On the other side of the door, they wouldn't be able to tell if it was me or Maxwell speaking.

My palms were sweaty and fear clutched at my heart, so Maxwell could indeed be the better negotiator since he operated on strict numerical values.

"Okay, Maxwell. Let's do that. …There…there…and done.

Updating…and done.”

“Very well.”

The smartphone replied with my exact voice.

So what was Maxell going to do? Anything was fine as long as it shattered this feeling like I was trapped in a cleaning locker which was then thrown in a big hole and had cement dumped on top. It was all riding on his performance!!

And then he spoke with my voice.

“Oh, shut up!! I’m sitting in front of the monitor with my pants down and it’s at the most exciting part, so can’t you wait until this box of tissues is empty!?”

……
……

You…

“You…! Maxwell…!?”

“Sure. The two behind the door have fallen silent. The unexpected attack has shut down their thought processes.”

I could tell my face was filling with bright red heat. I wanted to call this a false accusation, but I’d be in trouble if he brought up the folder I’d stuck in a hidden drive disguised as his BIOS space!

“More importantly, their thought processes will only remain shut down for around 30 seconds at the longest. If you do not act soon, they will recover.”

“Kh!!”

Opening the door to face my step-sisters was not an option now.

That meant the window!

I wanted to get as far away as possible. For more reasons than one!!

“By the way, the Class Rep next door should have her window open to view the moon on this clear night now that the storm has passed. That concludes my perfect simulation. Ehehn.”

“Sorry, forehead glasses Class Rep, but I’m dragging you into this!!”

I hopped to my feet, threw open the window, stepped back for a running start, and then leaped into the open sky. I wasn’t riding a bike with an alien in the basket, but I still flew in front of the moon and right through the open second story window next door.

The black-haired forehead glasses Class Rep was in her pajamas and looked utterly shocked.

“Kyahh!!”

“Nice one, Class Rep! That’s the normal reaction!!”

Just 30 seconds ago, I had been trapped with a vampire and zombie only a door away while a parallel processing computer stabbed me in the back. After that fantastical situation, the Class Rep’s normalcy soaked into the core of my being like the first taste of miso soup after returning from an overseas vacation.

Speaking of the Class Rep, she wore pastel-colored pajamas and she adjusted her glasses with a hand as if she could not believe what she was seeing.

“S-Satori-kun? Is it just me or have your own actions grown a little monstrous of late? You look like you should be wearing a cape and

a butterfly mask and calling yourself a gentleman thief.”

“…Heh. Humans are changed by their environment.”

“Well, whatever.”

As she spoke, the Class Rep shut her thin curtains instead of the window.

And at the same exact moment, I heard a door burst open in the neighboring house – which now meant my own.

“O-Onii-chan is gone!? Fuguu!”

“I wonder what kinds of exciting things Satori-kun was watching. What if it was older girls or blonde big sister types? Kyah!”

They apparently couldn’t tell I was in the Class Rep’s room thanks to the shut curtain.

They seemed more interested in searching my room than for me, but that was fine as long as it bought me time. And there was nothing inside my room I didn’t want them to find. Nothing *inside it*.

“So what are you going to do now, Satori-kun?”

The Class Rep supposedly had no idea what was going on, and yet she asked that, rummaged through her closet, and pulled out some sneakers.

For some reason, she had chopsticks, a toothbrush, a simple change of clothes, and exercise shoes for me at her house. And yet I hadn’t slept over at her house since before we moved up to middle school.

Maybe it was a lingering remnant of when my parents were getting

divorced. I had escaped to her place a lot back then.

But there shouldn't have been any reason for her to worry about me now.

"Thanks, Class Rep. I had business outside anyway, so this really-…"

When I reached for the shoes in relief, the Pajama Class Rep pulled them away some reason.

…?

"S-sorry. It's not your fault, Satori-kun."

She was muttering about something.

Just as I wondered why she was blushing, she confessed the reason.

"B-b-b-but I kind of wish you wouldn't loudly proclaim to the entire neighborhood that you're having an exciting time in front of the computer screen. Th-there are some wet tissues over there. Okay?"

Ma-

"Maxweeee

Part 2

It was all just too much.

But anyway, I borrowed the sneakers from the Class Rep and left through her house's front door.

She came down to see me off and her skeptical voice followed me out.

"Where are you headed this late? The convenience store?"

"Yeah. More or less."

I gave a dismissive wave and left.

Since the storm had just passed through, the area was damp but fresh. The air was cleaner than normal, so it may have been the perfect time for a night stroll.

Not that I was in the mood in the slightest.

I spoke to the smartphone in my hand.

"Maxwell."

"Sure."

"Let's get started."

Kukyou City was a strange place.

It was a picturesque sightseeing city surrounded by the sea and the mountains.

But it contained an abnormally high number of disasters, primarily lightning strikes and powerful winds, so it had taken advantage of that to become a disaster prevention city that made money off of disasters by inviting in multiple institutions researching disaster prevention and protection.

And the city had another face hidden deep underground.

A final testing ground for vampires and zombies.

Those undead and Archenemies were tested to see if they could get along with modern society.

And if they failed, they were executed and disposed of.

A massive network of underground tunnels spread like a spider web below the city and any Archenemy that caused problems was dragged into the darkness by men in black who appeared from the depths of the earth.

It did not matter what the reason was.

They could even be people like Erika or Ayumi who laughed, cried, and attended school like normal.

I had only learned of this by accident.

But now that I knew that those two girls who lived in my house could be taken away at any time, I couldn’t just sit idly by.

They weren’t the only Archenemies.

And there were other things just as important as those two and I could not let those things be trampled on.

So…

“Maxwell, give me the simulation data.”

“Sure. I have completed the scenario concerning the destruction of the Japanese Branch of the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation operating in its underground facility.”

The Bright Cross.

That international organization was thought to be peaceful and was well-known enough to have donation boxes next to the registers at national convenience store chains.

I was picking a fight with them.

“I have calculated 3448 scenarios for their later reaction, but in none of them do they maintain any influence over Kukyou City. I can promise you they will be fully driven from the city.”

“So all I can do is drive them from the city? What about the Archenemies outside of Kukyou City?”

“That is too wide a range for my simulation abilities. Either input different parameters and repeat the calculation or physically expand my system.”

So that was all I could manage for the time being.

I of course couldn’t allow the Bright Cross’s tyranny to continue anywhere in the world, but if I was going to fight something on such a massive scale, I had to start by solidifying my footing here first.

Fight.

That word seemed so vague and none of this felt remotely real as I wandered through the dark night.

“Maxwell? Where do I need to go?”

“Sure.”

My smartphone’s map app opened and with a single location pinned on it.

…*That’s pretty close by.*

Just as I thought that and looked up from the screen, I happened to be passing by a convenience store that faintly lit up the regional city night.

“Nn.”

“…?”

Someone suddenly bowed toward me.

Who was it, you ask?

A girl a head shorter than me who had wavy blonde hair grown to shoulder length. She wore a baggy white sweater and a chocolate-colored miniskirt. I could see more of her brilliantly white legs than necessary. I wasn’t sure that was doing much to protect her. It felt like seeing a dumb soldier holding his shield in the complete wrong direction during a hail of arrows.

She seemed to have just left the convenience store. She used both hands to hold a single plastic bag containing whatever she had bought.

To put it simply, she reminded me of a small animal.

That impression may have been helped by how her baggy sweater covered her mouth a little and only her fingertips poked out of the sleeves. However, her blonde hair was not the forcibly bleached

blonde of a delinquent girl. She was a half-Japanese girl with naturally blonde hair.

…*Hm? Half-Japanese?*

“Oh, you’re Itou Helen, right?”

When I used the name I had remembered, she bowed again.

She was an underclassman at school. She was popular among the 1st years and among the ruder upperclassmen who said they liked small girls.

I didn’t really know her, but I had helped her out when the guidance counselor was getting after her for having too short a skirt.

I don’t look like the type to do something so heroic? Needless to say, I only got dragged into it because I was nearby and the true criminals were a few of my mischievous male classmates.

So it was honestly strange I remembered her name and I didn’t feel like I had done anything for her.

I was like the boring merchant in the same party as a hero, a sage, and a magician. In fact, I was more like a villager or a corpse.

“Well, not that it matters. So is your house nearby? Just make sure you follow the main roads and walk below the cameras, okay?”

I tried to give her some upperclassman-y advice as I left.

No. I was just trying to use my position at school to escape since I couldn’t find anything to say.

In other words, I was a chicken who was afraid of this little girl.

I was afraid of failing to grasp the distance between us and making it awkward.

It was laughable that I thought I could fight an international foundation for my family.

"…chan." Itou Helen said something quietly. "You have the same scent as my Onii-chan, so I can relax around you."

I couldn't say anything for sure since I didn't know who exactly this "Onii-chan" was, but had something happened? She was in the 1st year, so had she gotten separated from her brother when moving up from middle school?

It was only a small thing like that.

"Maybe it's because I have a little sister too."

That was all I said.

And I had a big sister too.

Real conversations weren't like in dramas. If you weren't a good match, the conversation would trail off and create an awkward silence. It looked like the conversation was over, so I waved and started to leave.

"You have the same scent as my Onii-chan."

But Itou Helen said something again.

No, the conversation had never ended for her. Had it only seemed awkward to me?

"So please…be careful. But that's also…a somewhat dangerous scent."

“…”

Her point of view was so skewed from mine that this hardly qualified as advice.

But her words did seem to stab into the center of my chest.

Especially as someone about to pick a fight with the Bright Cross.

What kind of person was Itou Helen’s Onii-chan?

To be honest, I was more interested in her.

“Sure. Let’s both be careful.”

“…”

She bowed.

And this time we really did part ways.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“Just to be sure, let’s make sure Itou Helen isn’t following me before I head to the coordinates. Give me a route.”

“Sure. This is a lot like an open world quest, user.”

“I know. And why am I trying to *lose* the girl I met on the roadside? That’s not the Amatsu Satori way.”

But I was worried over nothing.

Itou Helen did not follow me.

I felt embarrassed about my unneeded caution and Maxwell left a

targeted comment.

“Reality is cruel. It would seem you have not met a video game heroine who becomes obsessed with you the second you meet her.”

“Well, I suppose this is honestly the real Amatsu Satori way. In fact, I’m kind of relieved for the confirmation that I’m standing in the real world here!!”

But it was true it would have been a problem had she followed me.

I called up the map app with its pinned location.

“Maxwell, so the location is in the old factory section of the Hirano Ward residential district?”

“Sure. That area has shrunk in size as the city becomes more of a commuter town. So after the owner on paper changed countless times, they ran off in the night, leaving the rights to the land ambiguous. In other words, the area is poorly managed and difficult to find accurate information on.”

“I can’t believe this. And I built a hidden fort there when I was a kid.”

That reminder of the fort under the bridge brought a prickling to a corner of my mind.

But this was no time to be searching for happy memories.

I had to make for the abandoned factory.

There were environmental standards for residential districts, so the factories had been in the way. History had its winners and losers and one half of that equation appeared as a crumbling moonlit silhouette.

Whether it was debt collectors or scrap metal collectors, the inside was almost entirely stripped of machinery, leaving a giant empty space.

I walked through the dark room with my smartphone's backlight and finally found "that".

It was something no one was able to carry out: a round door like to a bank vault.

"…"

These were officially known as tornado shelters installed for free in all the houses and offices of disaster-prone Kukyou City. But I had never seen one of them open.

And I had learned the truth through "a certain method".

The tornado shelter cover story was a lie and the city was actually filled with tunnels used to abduct Archenemies.

They were everywhere and could get in from anywhere.

These doors were inside every home and office, so there was no shutting them out.

I glanced to a biometric scanning panel and spoke.

"Maxwell. How long until you've hacked the system?"

I heard a quiet beeping.

Then I heard the complex latch opening with a series of rumbling sounds.

A text bubble appeared on my smartphone.

“Sure. That job is already complete.”

It opened.

Slowly.

Did this seem to be going too well for an amateur high school boy? It was the opposite. If I took one step outside of the optimal course determined by Maxwell’s simulations, I would die instantly. It was like losing your life if the needle skipped even slightly on the record. I could not even afford to stumble.

It started here.

The underground facility was vast. Things changed considerably depending on what entrance I used. I was a normal high school boy, but I had repeated the simulation over and over until even that high school boy could strike back at the Bright Cross. I could only continue with this. I would know the facility better than its owners at this point.

(The server, the bats, short circuits, the backup timing, hardware damage.)

I repeated a few terms in my mind.

Now.

Time to settle things with the Bright Cross.

…Or so I thought.

My thoughts ground to a halt.

I came across something unexpected.

However, it was not that I ran across a group wielding machineguns

or was attacked by tamed Archenemies as soon as I opened the door.

That would have been better.

As a vector, this was 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

There was nothing.

There was no one.

It was only a giant empty space. All of the specialty equipment and even the lights had been removed, so I wouldn't have been able to see my hand in front of my face without my smartphone's backlight.

But there had to be something here.

The loathsome Bright Cross had to be here!

"What…the hell?"

"No. I am unable to find an appropriate answer to your question. This situation was not in the simulation. I strongly recommend you suspend this task and withdraw."

I ignored Maxwell's suggestion and stepped into the long, long tunnel of that subterranean world. And I started running.

It was like being in a school at night.

There was no life there. There were no signs of anyone there.

This was definitely bad. It was entirely unexpected. More than a needle scratch, the entire record player had toppled over. And I could easily die if I set even one foot outside the simulation!

“User, I am having trouble maintaining a signal. I cannot guarantee a connection to your device.”

“Dammit!”

The thick disaster-resistant concrete worked against me. If the Bright Cross’s system had still been active, Maxwell could have secretly used it to boost the signal with their antennae.

If I lost Maxwell now, I was completely out of luck. It was possible I wouldn’t even be able to find my way back to the door I had come in through. And it was the only one open.

“What do you think happened? Do you think it’s ‘just’ that the Bright Cross is all gathered in one spot?”

“No. I can construct a few theories, but I cannot provide any objective proof for any of them.”

“…”

“But whatever the case, this is not normal. We can assume they had a reason forcing them to do this.”

Had an Archenemy like Erika or Ayumi gone berserk inside the facility?

Or had there been a confrontation and split between the armed humans of the Bright Cross?

But it didn’t seem like either of those.

There was no damage anywhere. There was no blood splattered anywhere and no scars on the walls or floor.

Everything that had been here had simply vanished.

It was almost like they had predicted one of those more violent fates and skipped town before it happened…

No.

Wait.

“Did they predict we would be coming here today at this time?”

“There is no evidence to suggest that. How that information would have leaked out is also unknown. But it is one of several possible theories.”

“But why!? If they knew, they could have just laid an ambush for me. Or they could have just attacked before I did anything. Using these abduction tunnels of theirs!”

“No. I have no information leading to a useful answer. But as this has happened, the Bright Cross likely decided this would benefit them or reduce their losses.”

It made no sense.

What was the Bright Cross thinking?

“There is nothing you can do here. This underground space covers all of Kukyou City, so it is unrealistic for you alone to investigate it all. Will you recruit more help or will you use drone robots instead? Either way, I suggest you prepare some kind of plan.”

I had to start all over again.

I had spent so much time putting together this scenario to destroy the Bright Cross, but it was entirely useless now.

“…Dammit.”

There was one place I wanted to check out.

The cold storage room in the medical lab.

The Level 4 Archenemies should have been kept frozen there, but it was as empty as everything else.

Not only were there no Archenemies, but I saw no sign of freezing equipment or even a single screw or nail.

The boxy space was so empty it seemed to be saying there had never been anything there.

The Bright Cross was not here.

I could not save the Archenemies.

I had never even considered this awful possibility.

“User.”

“…One more place.”

There may have been no reason for this one.

My motivation was mostly just sentimentality.

It was the center of that twisted subterranean world.

Level 4: The Colosseum.

“…”

There had never been anything in that vast circular space. Multiple unmanageable Archenemies had been tossed inside and made to kill each other there. And that was why the Bright Cross had had no way of erasing it.

That place alone looked just as it had when I saw it via “a certain method”.

I see.

So it really did exist…

“User, your smartphone’s battery has dropped below 50%. And the odds of escaping this underground area without the light and my support are below 2%.”

“Understood. Let’s get back.”

I didn’t want to die pointlessly there. I was just shocked to find there was no one to bring out with me.

In addition to the Bright Cross humans and the equipment they had carried out, there had to have been Archenemies trapped in here too.

And they had been treated just like the supplies and equipment…

“Damn, so I guess it’s back to the drawing board.”

“Whatever the reason, shouldn’t you be delighted that the Bright Cross has left Kukyou City?”

“Perhaps.”

But I didn’t want to be someone who was satisfied with this incomplete ending.

I started for the surface under Maxwell’s guidance. They had probably carefully planned their escape, so I doubted I would find any kind of hint leading me to them in this subterranean world.

But they had hid this giant facility from 800,000 people. They had

to have spread their roots to the administration, the police, the construction companies that worked underground, the public utilities, the gas company, and the subway.

They had to have left their scent somewhere.

My next step would be figuring out where that was.

With that in mind, I returned to the entrance in the abandoned factory.

And then it arrived.

The heavy bursting sound shook my stomach more than my eardrums and a vortex of light split through the night sky.

Even in my confusion, I quickly realized it was gunpowder exploding.

I briefly thought someone had thrown a bomb at me. The Bright Cross would probably go that far.

But I was wrong.

“…What!? Fireworks!?”

“Sure. According to the administrative records, Katou Fireworks Production submitted a request for a test firing and their request was approved. But this is too large for a test firing. That was likely a cover story.”

Countless fireworks continued to fly up and create colorful rings of sparks in the sky.

Each one created hundreds of thousands of lights and some might have reached the millions.

But what were these fireworks celebrating?

My pulse was pounding and unease filled my chest.

“User.”

“What is it, Maxwell?”

“I have received some interesting information via a Full Seg broadcast. It is a national broadcast.”

I didn’t want to watch it.

But I was afraid to throw this out.

Was this what it felt like to be a patient with an ominous shadow on the X-ray?

I breathed in and out.

And I spoke.

“Play it on the screen, Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

The smartphone screen immediately switched to a TV broadcast. A young woman’s high-pitched voice came from a national key station.

“Archenemy vs. Archenemy! The Colosseum is finally beginning! This new form of gambling has the full approval of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare!! Getting a head start on the rest of the country, its home ground of Kukyou City is having one hell of a celebration!!”

……

……

What?

Did she say Colosseum???

Isn't that a terrible scandal sealed away in the darkness below Kukyou City? Isn't that what the giant Bright Cross organization was working so hard to hide!?

What the hell is this?

Why is a sexy host boldly announcing it to the entire country in a brightly-lit studio!?

"This is Karen-chan, your host in the bright bunny costume. We were having trouble getting an official casino off the ground, so it ended up as this kind of gambling system instead. Looks like Japan's creative spirit hasn't been snuffed out quite yet! We're brimming with the power to create new things and systems! Let's get ahead of the world with an explosion of innovation! And that means this Colosseum as a new form of entertainment!!"

I was dumbfounded by what I heard from the long-haired host who wore a bunny costume that sparkled with the blue of a rainforest butterfly.

This was probably how American families had felt when they saw the news that funny-smelling dried plants had been legalized just because the prisons were running out of space.

In short: What the hell is wrong with you!!!???

"Maxwell, is this for real? Has the Bright Cross really gone public with their insane Colosseum!?"

"Sure. I checked the administrative system since they mentioned

the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare and this has been officially approved. In addition to the politicians worried about negative opinion polls concerning the idea of publicly run casinos due to the benefits given to bureaucrats in the similar horse racing and lottery systems, a medical group like the Bright Cross would have already had a large pipeline set up with the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. It would not have been difficult to set this up."

And yet…

Even so…!!

"We're talking about televised public executions! Can they really get away with that? How can they!?"

The blue bunny girl on the screen seemed to answer my obvious question.

"Okay, okay. We ensure you that the money from the votes you cast for a winner – that is, the gambling tickets you purchase – will all be used to cover our management expenses. And the biggest of those is this! Every Archenemy that takes part will receive a substantial reward for every match they win. The first win nets them 10 million and each consecutive win doubles in value! Of course, they're free to step down if they feel continuing would be too dangerous. They must fight fiercely and manage their funds wisely! We are rooting that these Archenemies will end up with a comfortable life!!"

…*So that's how they're presenting it.*

Even if an Archenemy collapsed after multiple battles, it would be the greedy contestant's responsibility, not the management's. And they had announced the prize money would come from the people who had bet on the loser. This would only increase people's hate for the undead fighting in front of the cameras.

And the Archenemies wouldn't actually be given the option to step down.

If every last one of them kept fighting unto death, the management would never have to pay a single yen in prize money. And so they would force the Archenemies to do exactly that.

"And if a contestant dies during the match, their body is given to the winner. Hm? I wonder what this special rule is for? Well, there will be tons of werewolves and vampires here. Whether it's eating them or controlling them, I'm sure they have some use for it!"

They had even gone the extra mile.

Not only did this increase everyone's hatred for the Archenemies being captured and forced to fight, but it also gave an excuse that rid people of any questions about what happened to them afterwards.

"The examples might be foreign, but there is precedent for combat tournaments that require contestants to sign away any liability if they die! We can't let them outdo us! Look at boxing and professional wrestling bound by all their compliance rules! You can't make anything unique with that! So let's make a tournament with the highest of risks and the highest of returns!! Karen-chan here will be rooting for you!! Doom doom doom too too too!!"

This was insane.

Not only was this was being broadcast, but it was a national thing. A hundred million people were watching this and possibly even the entire world thanks to online streaming. Why didn't anyone stop it? Why didn't anyone stand up!?

A small box at the bottom of the screen displayed random messages sent to the official SNS account.

And they said:

“Ohhhh! I haven’t been this excited in forever!!”

“So an age of casinos is finally upon us.”

“We need to feel angry and depressed. But it’s amusing, so I’m still watching without getting involved. lol.”

There was no guarantee all of them were being honest.

People’s personalities often changed between a face-to-face conversation and on a faceless message board. And Maxwell had said politicians were supporting this after worryingly negative opinion polls about the possibility of publicly run casinos, so it was possible all of the positive opinions were from hired shills.

But.

Even so.

It was disgusting. It was utterly repugnant. I couldn’t accept that people were watching this fight to death in front of their dinner tables just because it was placed in a nice wrapper. And any sense of rejection melted away as they sided with the majority and as they laughed and angrily yelled at the victimized undead without feeling any guilt. That malice made me sick to the stomach.

“…”

I could barely stay standing, like I was anemic. My vision would have grown dark if I hadn’t stayed focused.

But the world didn’t care.

Karen spoke from the screen with a smile on her face.

“Itou Helen the witch vs. Kuroyama Hinoki the mermaid! Would you look at that! This is looking spectacular from the very first match!”

Those words were the last straw.

I recalled the small animal of a girl with wavy shoulder-length blonde hair who I had just recently met at the convenience store. That harmless underclassman had cowered down just from the guidance counselor getting after her for her skirt.

Itou Helen.

She was…an Archenemy?

And she had fallen into the Bright Cross’s hands!?

I had only just seen her.

If I had done something then, this wouldn’t have happened. No, why had she even spoken to me when we barely knew each other? Had she noticed the gazes targeting her? She had said I reminded her of her “Onii-chan”. Had that been a weird illusion brought on by her desire for someone to protect her?

Whether it had been intentional or not, she had sent out an SOS.

And I had rejected it.

So was it my fault this had happened?

“The match begins today at 10 o’clock. It’s an exclusive live broadcast! Whether you prefer a national broadcast, a satellite channel, or a video streaming site, just check out this station’s channel there! Ticket sales end 10 minutes in advance! Now, now! Get excited and take part. The Colosseum hopes you will find much excitement, happiness, and riches☆”

[Search Engine] In Front of the Event Site [Absolute NOAH]

This is your confirmation paperwork.

Yes, yes. Just like always.

Now, please come in.

It would help if you went underground and entered using the parking lot's industrial elevator.

Ha ha. Is that so? I thought you would be in a frenzy getting everything working under the new system, but it's all moving surprisingly smoothly.

So what method are we using to replace the tunnels? What is Laplace saying?

Oh? A tour bus?

That's pretty roundabout. A refrigerated truck for transporting fish would be more direct. You're right. The bus might indeed be more convenient when you need to be able to stop wherever you want. My apologies. And with all the personnel you need to transport on a "job", I suppose a tour bus would be best since the soldiers can ride up top while the "cargo" is held down below. I see.

Yes, I'm sorry.

I didn't mean to delay you. Please keep up the good work.

…

…

…

Yes, hello?

I’m here at the scene. Yes, Itou Helen was just delivered.

A witch and a mermaid. That should make a decent initial impact. And it honestly wouldn’t be very pretty to have two filthy guys fighting each other.

Anyway.

Now we can safely restart the Colosseum.

Chapter 1

Part 1

Everything had happened in such quick succession that my mind was nearly overloaded, but I couldn't just stand around forever.

The first battle began at 10.

That was when a public execution would be broadcast live nationwide.

"Right now it's…just past 8."

I had less than 2 hours until it began.

Where was this crucial match being held?

Itou Helen had been walking out in the open not long before. Even if the Bright Cross had taken her away, they couldn't have taken her too far. And that blue bunny girl had said their home ground was Kukyou City, so they had to be nearby. The Bright Cross still had its roots in this city.

Where had Itou Helen been captured and where had she been taken?

"Maxwell, call the police."

"No. And send them where? We do not know where the victim or perpetrators are, so no police officers can be sent in."

"You saw what they were showing on TV! There had to be more than 100 million witnesses. How can they not stop this!?"

"No. They cannot be accused of anything if this is a recording

passing itself off as a live broadcast or if it is entirely fictional. It could also be a live broadcast from outside the country while only pretending to be inside Japan. The police would first have to do some investigation to determine whether or not Japanese law even applies to those 'on the television screen'."

"We only have 2 hours."

"Sure. And that is likely why they felt comfortable announcing this so boldly. They decided that no one can stop it now."

"…Dammit."

The Bright Cross was not just some insane moron uploading videos to the internet, so they would think about how to cover their asses.

So if they're going this far, did it mean they had a system in place to make sure they couldn't be charged with a crime?

…*Wait, uploading videos?*

"Maxwell, can we leak the data of the true Colosseum onto the internet? Do that and everyone should be able to tell how horrific this really is!"

"No. What you have is merely simulation data and not actual witness information. In other words, it does not qualify as evidence. …And the underground facility was cleared out."

The Bright Cross covered everything up in reality while we had divulged the truth in virtual reality.

If the two came into conflict, the Bright Cross would win.

And yet they were the ones that abandoned their underground facility because they knew it was inconvenient for them!

I couldn’t rely on the police.

Leaking the truth onto the internet would accomplish nothing.

No one was on my side.

“What do I do?”

The Bright Cross had surpassed our simulation.

They had upgraded their cruel Colosseum to the level of national authorization.

And one of the combatants there would be Itou Helen, an underclassman from my school.

“What can I even do now…?”

What could I do?

I didn’t need unrealistic heroic fantasies here. I could wait until later to complain about how weak and powerless I was.

What was truly within my grasp? How far would my hand reach?

I didn’t know where the Bright Cross’s new headquarters were or where Itou Helen was being imprisoned now that she had apparently been captured.

What I wanted was information.

If I could locate either the Bright Cross or Itou Helen, I could find the other. That underclassman who was apparently a witch had been abducted by the Bright Cross, so she would have been brought to one of their bases or hideouts.

I didn’t have much time.

I didn't want to waste any of it.

So even if it was a roundabout route, I had to take the definite course ahead of me. That way I wouldn't run into dead ends later and have to make pathetic U-turn after pathetic U-turn.

Which meant…

"…Erika and Ayumi."

Those two had once overcome the Bright Cross's final test and been given the freedom to live in human society. They had a connection to all this, so they might be able to give me a hint if I asked.

However.

Once I returned home and opened the front door, Erika and Ayumi both immediately attacked me.

"Orahhh! What happened to my melon bread, Onii-chaaan!? Fuguuu!!"

"Oh, dear. This is a problem. Your big sister prefers to avoid these more inappropriate methods, but you leave me no choice."

Yes.

I had never resolved the melon bread issue back home!

"Gyaaahh! If both of you perform a cross armlock on an arm, I can never escape! I can't even tap out!!"

And you both know that performing an armlock means holding my arm to your crotch, don't you? I'm not letting you do additional damage by going all 'kyah, pervert!' after the fact! Especially you, negligee big sister. Based on the feeling on my arm, you aren't

wearing any underwear, are you!?

“Huh? Onii-chan, what’s this plastic bag?”

“This aroma… Why is there Asamiya melon bread here!?”

L-looks like I have to explain.

“It’s true that Asamiya’s melon bread is a super rare limited product that they only sell 20 of each day, but they also send some to regional retail stores. And for some reason, that somewhat expensive organic vegetable convenience store called Natural Seven is registered with them and gets some of Asamiya’s melon bread! You can thank Maxwell for all that information!!”

Those magic words dispelled the curse of the double armlock.

“Ohhh! So this is the limited edition bread I dreamed of…”

“Oh? You even bought 2 of them. How adorable of you.”

From their perspective, the single bread they had been willing to perform wrestling moves over had doubled into 2. I could only pray it didn’t taste weird to them.

But then Erika and Ayumi both split their melon bread in half.

“Wait, what are you two doing? Can you not fit that much in your mouth?”

“Eh? Well…”

“With only 2 of them, there’s none for you, Onii-chan.”

I was caught off guard by that one.

“Wait, wait. This was a purification ritual to wash away my own sin.

I already ate the first one.”

“That doesn’t matter. Your beautiful, kind, and smart big sister has a heart as big as her boobs, so she could never eat this while leaving you with nothing.”

It didn’t really add up right. When both sisters handed me a half, I ended up with a whole one. Nevertheless, they both began eating the melon bread with the biggest smiles imaginable.

They may have been more upset that they couldn’t share the bread with everyone than at having it taken from them.

But now that the tense atmosphere was gone, I felt like I could bring up the real topic at hand.

“Erika, Ayumi. I’d like to discuss something with you.”

“Wut ih it?”

“Ayumi-chan, don’t talk with food in your mouth. So, Satori-kun, what would you like to discuss?”

“Well.” I nodded. “Um, about the Bright Cro-…”

Two pairs of glowing eyes seemed pierce my soul.

“Kah…hah…?”

My breath caught in my throat.

They were still only eating melon bread in their pajamas, but the look in their eyes had entirely changed.

“Hmm. If possible, I never wanted to hear that name from your mouth, Onii-chan.”

“There’s no helping that. The pandemonium is out in the open now. It was even playing on our living room TV.”

Yes. That broadcast had played on TV.

That meant my sisters would know about it. They would know the Level 4 Colosseum hidden deep underground had mutated into something else.

Trapped by the brightly shining light in their eyes, I sat down like a frog cowering in front of a great snake.

“U-umm. An underclassman at school was apparently captured for this Colosseum, so I’d like to do something about that before the match begins…”

“Ohh? Now that’s interesting. So my super indoorsy and scrawny Onii-chan is going to pick a fight with the great Bright Cross? When did you turn into a warrior of justice chosen by heaven?”

“That’s right. If anything, I think letting Ayumi-chan and me go on a rampage has better odds. Eh heh heh. Not even the Bright Cross’s plans could continue if Kukyou City was filled with vampires and zombies.”

Wait, wait, you idiots.

Aren’t you getting everything backwards!?

“This isn’t a virtual reality built in a disaster environment simulator! There are no continues here!! You can’t fill the real world with vampires and zom-…!!”

As I shouted, my sisters placed their index fingers on my lips.

I stopped speaking and they took over.

“Do *you* understand that, Onii-chan? We’re talking about real lives here.”

“…”

“Oh, dear. And unlike a vampire or a zombie, a human like you has even less of a chance. I bet you haven’t even imagined what failure means when you’re dealing with *the* Bright Cross.”

Yes.

Of course they understood.

Those two had survived the true Colosseum in that hellish subterranean world, so they knew firsthand how cruel the Bright Cross was.

Would the Bright Cross go easy on me because I was a human like them? Would they overlook me?

Of course not.

If “something” happened, would I be the only one harmed? What about my sisters and parents back home? What about my school and neighborhood? Even the Class Rep might be used as a shield. They would go that far.

Itou Helen was an underclassman from school.

That was all.

If I weighed her against my sister sand the Class Rap, it was obvious who would win out.

Was it really worth going this far to rescue her?

What did I want to do?

I thought.

I contemplated.

And then I raised my head again to face those two who knew true hell.

“That’s all the more reason I have to stand up to them. If there’s any risk of them laying even a finger on the people I care about, of course I have to destroy them.”

Yes.

That’s right.

The Bright Cross had already done that. They had built a strange execution facility below the city I had been born and raised in, they had mercilessly disposed of countless Archenemies, they had placed Erika and Ayumi on the chopping block, and now they had reached for an underclassman at school.

Who could say for sure that it would end there?

Tomorrow I might find Erika or Ayumi being threatened on TV. If the Class Rep or I became an inconvenience for the Bright Cross, they might claim we were some random Archenemy or another to have us killed in a battle with the undead.

“Anyone who’s willing to abandon someone else will be abandoned by others.”

Heat boiled in the pit of my stomach.

And I let that heat out in the form of words.

“I think an honest person will sometimes run into trouble, but someone who refuses to save anyone will eventually not be saved

by others. I don't want to end up like Itou Helen there on the TV screen. And because I don't, I'll save someone who's in that position now. I have to save her! It doesn't matter how well I know her!!"

After all, I would never want to see Erika or Ayumi maliciously displayed on the TV screen.

I would never want to see odds placed on their chances as people bet on or against them.

I had no idea if Itou Helen would come to save us if our situations were reversed.

But that was no reason to abandon her.

I wanted to live with pride.

I wasn't going to live a life where I hung my head and held my stomach whenever I caught sight of the name Itou Helen!

"This time it's real. There are no redos or continues here."

Dammit.

It was obvious once I said it. It was so simple.

And that's why I can't afford to fail! I refuse to give up on her here! I will not let them drag us away from the path of normalcy! Will I save Itou Helen? If I couldn't say 'of course', how could I call myself human!!!???"

Erika and Ayumi looked dazed.

They might have been shocked at how vague my "plan" was.

"…If only everyone in the world was like you, Satori-kun."

“?”

Erika muttered something under her breath.

“It’s nothing. Anyway, I refuse to take my precious little brother anywhere dangerous, so I’m not giving you any hints. I won’t tell you anything that would lead you to the Bright Cross.”

“Kh.”

“But, Onii-chan, you’ll still head out alone to save Itou Helen, won’t you?”

“Y-yes. Of course I will. If you two won’t help out, then I’ll go do it on my own! Why wouldn’t I!? How is that girl any different from us!?”

“Then go look into it on your own,” said Erika with a sigh. But she had more to say. “Satori-kun, the Bright Cross is large. Incredibly so. But giant organizations have their own holes.”

“They do information warfare differently, Onii-chan. You can do 3 things with information: gather it, spread it, and hide it. The Bright Cross exists all around the world, so they specialize in gathering and spreading information. But that makes them very poor at the hiding part.”

“Ah.”

Now that they mentioned it, we all knew of the Bright Cross.

The CIA was the world’s largest intelligence agency, but being a household name the world over was a bad thing for them. They had not worked to be well known. They had simply become well known after growing so large.

Why had the Bright Cross left their underground facility?

Because I had discovered it.

They had feared receiving a perfect attack based on massive simulation data.

They had feared it?

Such a large organization had feared me?

"…"

I couldn't let them distract me.

I had to look back over the situation.

Who, where, and what had been involved in this incident surrounding Itou Helen? What was the deepest darkness here? My sisters had said the Bright Cross was so large that they could not fully hide their own existence. That was why they had forcibly set up a situation where no one could touch them even if they were seen.

"Thanks, Erika and Ayumi. I've finally seen what I have to do."

My sisters shrugged in an exasperated sort of way.

Sorry I'm such a terrible brother.

But I have to go. I have to stand up to this wicked and unreasonable absurdity.

And so I turned my back on the family waiting back home and spoke two simple words.

"I'm going."

Part 2

I left the house.

I was exposed to the night air.

It was a true night where even the moonlight looked sinister.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure. Exiting standby mode. User, give me my orders.”

“Check for any calls from around Itou Helen’s home. Start with any calls to the police.”

“There was an emergency call from her home’s landline at 8:03 PM. The call lasted 2 minutes and 45 seconds.”

Well, it makes sense after their daughter was suddenly placed in the ring on TV.

No.

“Unlike me, they would have no way of knowing that’s a real fight to the death. The bunny girl might have mentioned the loser’s body, but that could have just been talk. Calling the police right away seems sudden.”

“Perhaps they thought she was forcibly recruited or abducted. After the police, they called the general reception desk at Kukyou 1st Broadcasting.”

“The TV station is claiming not to know anything either? But how?”

“They claim to have purchased and broadcasted a foreign TV program and thus have not played any role in the production. They say to direct any questions to Socialist Carnalgrad National Broadcasting.”

So that was why.

And did that country even exist?

“Then that’s where we’ll start.”

I could understand the police being caught off guard. The higher ups might be in the Bright Cross’s pocket, but the workers at the bottom would never believe that anyone would be brazen enough to kill people in the middle of a live TV broadcast.

But the way the TV station was brushing people off was clearly more malicious. I could tell they already had a script to follow.

I doubted everyone working there was also working for the Bright Cross, but they obviously had taken root there.

Kukyou 1st Broadcasting.

I was sure I could find something there.

With any luck, Itou Helen would be there, but if not, I could probably mess with their broadcast equipment to cause a malfunction and perhaps even put a stop to their farce.

“Maxwell, let’s get to the broadcast station. I’ll need your help to get in. Can you do that?”

“Sure. You are the only user I accept.”

I was glad to hear that second par.t

Especially when attacking a TV station could easily get me labeled a terrorist in the newspaper headlines.

It was just before 9.

The trains were still running.

I was on my way to fight an international organization, so it was laughable that I needed my IC card to get there.

It wasn't even the weekend, but the area around the station was crowded.

The large screen on an electronics store wall displayed a smiling bunny girl colored the bright blue of a rainforest butterfly.

"The Colosseum is finally beginning. But, but. I might not know exactly what an Archenemy is, so I wonder if the witch or the mermaid is more frightening."

"The definition of a witch is too broad to say anything for sure, but a mermaid is much simpler. Unlike in the fairy tales, historical mermaids are man-eating creatures. They sit on stones, lure sailors into the ocean with their alluring song, drag their struggling prey to the bottom of the ocean, and devour them. Truly a stereotypical Archenemy."

"Oh, my, my. So as most people seem to expect, will the more monstrous mermaid have the advantage here?"

"It's hard to say. I've heard that Itou Helen is a Greek-style witch. More specifically, one based on the Circe tradition. In that case, the more frightening of the two would be…"

It pissed me off.

But no one at all was throwing stones at the screen. In fact…

“Don’t push! Please don’t push! The tickets are on sale until 9:50! There’s still plenty of time, so calm down, everyone!!”

A young woman was yelling from a stand much like for a local lottery.

“It’s all or nothing! You bet everything on one of the two. It’s the most basic form of gambling and is far simpler than horse racing or keirin. If you don’t know what to do, this tipster will tell you how it’s done. Don’t you want some information to help you make easy money!?”

There were a lot of voices like that near the ticket stand crowd.

I could even see some uniformed police officers here and there:

“Ksshhh! Yes, yes. All of you good kids follow the rules and enjoy this game meant for proper ladies and gentleman. The dancer police would really prefer not to ruin your lovely evening.”

…They were all like this.

Not all of them would be involved with the Bright Cross. I doubted even that strange tipster man had been informed in advance and then simply kept quiet until today. And this had to have been a complete surprise for those dancer police or whatever they were.

“Beautiful Japanese High Vision provides a new age of HD for a new age Colosseum.”

“Hachitama is advertising the Dive Device’s Reading Company. The latest forms of entertainment can be seen and touched. Hachitama Electronics supports the Colosseum.”

They were even adapting to it.

They were riding this sudden wave and even egging it on.

“In a way, this is even uglier than the Bright Cross itself.”

“Shall I bring down the power in this area?”

That would have been oh-so-satisfying but ultimately meaningless.

I entered the station and boarded a train.

The electronic advertisement above the automatic door displayed the following text:

“The Circe Witch vs. the Man-Eating Mermaid. The billionaire’s countdown has reached 43:20. Buy your ticket now!”

When had the world gone insane?

I didn’t want to think it always had been.

I wanted to believe something had caused this. That I could fix the broken gear to return everything to normal.

After arriving near the broadcast station, I found a commotion there too.

But it looked different from a simple gambling frenzy. I don’t know where they got it from, but a group had blown up a photo of Itou Helen and placed it all over the panels and placards they held.

“Helen-taaan! Can you hear us cheering for you!?”

“Ohhhh! We’re on your side!! We’re praying for your victory!! Go, go, Helen-taaaan!!”

What do you mean you’re on her side?

If you really were, you wouldn’t push her toward an actual fight to the death!

“User, reaching the broadcast station is easy enough, but how do you intend to get inside?”

“I’ll rely on you.”

I walked right up to the front gate.

The guards on either side naturally glared at me, but…

“Good evening.”

With that, I pressed my palm against the ID panel on the side of the automatic glass door.

…With my smartphone still in my hand.

It was probably a vein scanner like at a bank ATM, but that didn’t matter with Maxwell’s machine power.

With a standard beep, the entire panel glowed green to show I was approved.

The tough-looking guards nodded at me.

“Good evening.”

“Yes, yes.”

After that, I walked right through the glass gate.

“It would be best to slip in as a part-time janitor. Labor standards ban anyone under 18 from working past 8, so it would be easiest to pass you off as a baby-faced college student.”

“Seriously? So in the data here, I’m older than Erika? I can’t imagine living in a world like that.”

What I needed was data on the Colosseum's live broadcast.

"Hacking station intranet…" said Maxwell.

The results were displayed 30 seconds later.

"There are records of a great quantity of materials being delivered to the 2nd song hall. The format is much like that of an MMA tournament."

"Where is the waiting room for contestants?"

"I searched for records of one, but did not find anything. However…"

"What is it, Maxwell?"

"The delivery list contained two large animal cages. They are the type used by vets and circuses and are built to contain even a Bengal tiger."

"Goddamn them!!"

At any rate, I had to get to the 7th floor.

If I was lucky, the cages holding Itou Helen and her opponent would be there, but if not, I could still gather information from any computers or phones I found.

Or so I thought.

Until I actually rode the elevator up to the 7th floor, that is.

"Ah."

I stared blankly for a moment.

It was right there in the middle of the hallway.

As if they had hired a moving company, a girl in a cage had been carried in by attaching wheels and handles to the box.

I didn't count how many men were standing around it.

My eyes were drawn to the tearful blonde girl curled up in the cage.

There was no sign of the baggy white sweater or chocolate-colored miniskirt from before.

Instead, she wore a short black dress, a pointed wide-brimmed hat, and a thick cape. She used both hands to hold a glass wand that looked like a complex collection of clear tubes and protuberances. She looked just like a witch from a children's picture book, but I doubted Itou Helen would choose to dress like that after being abducted.

So what had happened here?

What had happened to her original clothes?

The answer was obvious.

They had been stripped from her.

By the many hands gathering around her.

"Ohh."

I couldn't maintain my thoughts beyond that point. In fact, I was amazed I managed it that far.

"Owwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!"

I yelled.

I let out a roar.

The various stubbly men finally turned around to see what was going on, but I was already charging straight toward them. I tackled one of them to the ground, punched him in the face, and bit at another man's arm that reached for me from the side. The curse in my heart hoped to see the bone.

"What's wrong with this kid!? He's gone insane!!"

They kicked me in the back.

As I writhed on the ground, the soles of their shoes pressed down on my gut, my chest, my back, and my head. They pummeled me from all sides.

To be honest, I could not stop the fire burning inside me. So I wasn't even pretending to be tough; I honestly couldn't feel the pain.

Before long, I heard a shrill scream. It wasn't mine and it wasn't from the scum kicking me.

It was the girl in the cage.

The witch threw down the glass wand someone had given her and grabbed the cage's bars with her small hands as she cried.

Not at her own circumstances, but at seeing me being punched and kicked.

I learned for the first time that my anger could kick into an even higher gear.

"Maxweeee

lllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll!!”

“Sure.”

His response was immediate.

I heard something popping and bursting from the chests and hips of the men around me.

It was the lithium batteries of their radios and cellphones.

The explosion in their pockets and right next to their skin was enough to smash the bone.

As the men screamed and writhed in pain, I slowly stood up.

The cage’s lock…was analog. I thought it was called a dimple lock, but I didn’t know the details and I couldn’t just leave it to Maxwell.

Then it didn’t matter who.

I grabbed one of the men by the collar and slammed his back against the hallway wall.

“Gah!?”

“Where’s the key?”

“I-I don’t know. We’re…ow…we’re just bottom level ADs! I don’t know about any key!!”

“Maxwell.”

“Sure. User, please press your smartphone against the target’s ear.”

“Are you going to use ultrasonic waves?”

“No. This is a mobile phone, so I can directly use microwaves,” calmly replied Maxwell’s message. “An international health agency has reported that a conversation of more than 20 minutes increases the risk of a brain tumor. If the microwaves are redirected to focus inside the target’s cranium, we can plant the seeds of the invisible grim reaper there. Let us induce cancer cells in an entirely inoperable location.”

I was pretty sure this was a bluff.

But part of me didn’t care if it wasn’t.

“W-wait! You’re kidding, right!?”

“You can believe it or not. But do you really think this is an innocent prank after I blasted your leg with a cyber-attack?”

“I-I really don’t know! C’mon, I’m sorry! So, waaaaaaait!?”

“Cancer risk…30%...40%...50%...”

“This is taking too long. Maxwell, kick it up to 100% right away. We can have him talk after we’re sure he’s gonna die. Just like a head blinking after being removed with a guillotine.”

I heard a loud thud.

The man’s eyes had rolled back in his head and he crumpled to the ground. I’d prefer to leave out this detail, but he also pissed himself.

“He didn’t talk even after that, so he really must not have known,” surmised Maxwell.

“I’m not so sure.”

But even without the key, I had made it to Itou Helen in her cage.

As long as I could keep her from entering the Colosseum studio, I could save her. I could even cart the cage outside of the building.

Itou Helen sobbed in the cage.

“Um, Senpai, um, uh, why…?”

“I don’t know. What do you think? Is this also just like your ‘Onii-chan’?”

“…”

“Anyway, leave the rest to me. Once I get you out of the TV station-…”

I trailed off.

A voice spoke from the broadcast equipment in the hallway.

“Ding dong dong dong. The legal gambling Colosseum will begin airing in 10 minutes. All staff gather in the studio. I repeat…”

I checked my smartphone’s clock and saw it was nearly 10.

Damn!

All the doors around me opened. Men and women exited them. They all looked at Itou Helen who picked back up the glass wand and held it to her flat chest as she cowered inside the cage. They were approaching!!

“Maxwell.”

“You are outnumbered. The battery attack is not almighty.”

“I wasn’t asking for that. How far have you made it into the TV station’s system? Can you place a fake ID for me in there?”

“Sure. But you have no time. Make your order quickly.”

That was when I threw my hands in the air and shouted at the arriving staff.

“What is the meaning of this!? Are you even thinking about the condition of my fighter!?”

“Who are you…?”

“Amatsu Satori.”

I was hesitant to use my real name with these monsters, but I didn’t have time to sit around thinking up a cool fake name.

“You can check if you want, but I’m from that witch’s school! I’m here as her second!! I know you’ve probably paid a lot of money to put on this TV show, but don’t you forget that I’ve got a ton of money riding on this too! Don’t treat her so carelessly! How is she supposed to win like this!?”

I had to buy some time.

Until Maxwell could finish his work.

“Or what? Is this whole thing fixed from the start? Ohh, so that’s it. Well, how about I go reveal it all on some message boards, blogs, and SNSs!? If it turns out this new legal gambling was fixed from the very first match, all those drunks spending all their money on tickets are gonna riot, don’t you think!?”

A heard a quiet beep from my smartphone.

At the same time, another staff member sighed after confirming my identity on their tablet.

“He really is the Archenemy’s second. We also have a record of him

entering the studio.”

“Our apologies.”

As the female staff member relaxed, I clenched and unclenched my hands in front of my face.

“I’m glad you understand.”

“Amatsu-san, the broadcast time is approaching. Please follow us to the stage.”

“Fine. But! Next time!! Don’t you dare approach my golden-egg-laying goose without my permission!”

I grabbed at the handle of Itou Helen’s cage as if snatching her away from the staff who had given me a lame apology.

The small animal style of blonde witch looked confused, so I secretly showed her my smartphone screen.

It said:

“Sorry. I promise I’ll get you out of here, so please focus on surviving this one match for now.”

And…

“We’re in this together. I won’t abandon you. Let’s both get out of here alive.”

The studio was close by.

As soon as the soundproofed double doors opened, I was hit by an overwhelming deluge of noise and light.

“Ladies and gentlemen!! It’s time for the Colosseum, the game that

is sure to excite any reasonable adult!!”

The backlight was too bright to see anything.

Finally, a square ring came into view through the blinding spotlight.

But it was not surrounded by ropes like for boxing or professional wrestling. It was a giant 15 meter bug cage made of transparent reinforced glass. That was the stage for the deadly battles.

And the cheers came from the stepped stadium-style seating surrounding it in every direction.

It was not all that different from the setup for professional wrestling or mixed martial arts.

But where had all these people come from?

This was a Colosseum where people would really fight to the death. The location was supposed to be a secret.

My question was answered by the bunny girl standing on top of the bug cage.

Her long hair and the bunny costume were both the bright blue of a rainforest butterfly.

She stood tall with microphone in hand and she vied for everyone’s attention as the flood of light seemed to stab down toward her.

“Good evening, all of you who won the strict lottery based on your ticket number! But, but! Are you sure that was a good thing? This gamble is entirely decided on the result of the battle itself. I hope you didn’t use up all your luck just getting here.”

I couldn’t believe them.

There was something wrong with both the blue bunny girl and the cheerful crowd! There were so many of them. When they were sent the location through email or whatever, did none of them run to the police? Really? Not even one!?

“On one side we have the motivated Itou Helen who has been certified as a witch! How does it feel to have deceived all your friends at school for so long? But tonight let’s throw out those lies and fight with everything we’ve got! We need a real battle between monsters!!”

…*You!!*

My underclassman cowered down in the cage as the many strobe lights and camera lenses turned her way, but did she really look that wicked?

I clenched my teeth.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“Turn my smartphone’s HD mode on. It may be silly now that she’s standing in front of the TV camera, but I want to record her face. I’m not letting her be forgotten.”

“Understood. I will also record her behavior and stance and create a color chart for her face. That way, I can search for her even without a front-on shot.”

“And if they’re going to throw out their morals, I’ll just have to do the same. If that domineering bunny is going to look down on me, I’ll just have to get some low angle shots of her crotch!!

Isn’t it strange how the tighter the fabric over a girl’s crotch, the puffier it looks!?”

“User, I must question your character here.”

Meanwhile, the situation advanced.

There was no escape now, so we would have to overcome this rather than avoid it.

“We might have a lovely image of mermaids, but they’re more like the gangsters of the sea. These man-eating monsters mercilessly bare their fangs against drowning humans. Please welcome Kuroyama Hinoki!!”

On the other side of the giant bug cage, an identical cage was carted in. It contained a girl with long black hair who looked the same age as if not a little older than me. And her hair really was long. It looked more than ankle length. That hair was wrapped tightly around her bare legs to create a silhouette much like a fish’s tail fin.

She was not wearing any clothes. Her chest and lower stomach were hidden by the hair wrapped around her torso.

“What…is that? That’s a mermaid?”

“Sure. There are a variety of theories as to the origin of mermaids, but one says they normally wear the skin of a seal and a naked woman emerges when they arrive on land. This may be that subspecies.”

Even if it was a part of her body, this Archenemy covered her body with something other than her own skin to achieve new function while moving through the water.

“And if the seal skin is taken from her while she is on land, the mermaid must marry that person. While naked.”

“Dammit, just analyze this opponent. Dammit!!”

“User, please do not tap the shutter icon so quickly while pointing the lens at a naked hair-wrapped girl. People might question my character as well.”

Among the many staff members on that side, one young man had a tense expression.

That was probably her second.

He was the one and only person who had decided to take the side of the monster in the cage. Unlike the foolish prince from the fairy tale, he had realized what the mermaid was and still accepted her.

“…”

“…”

Our eyes met for just a brief moment.

His eyes showed hopeless panic but also hostility.

“Is everyone ready? Are you clutching your tickets? Then let’s get started! Let’s begin this new entertainment and new industry that is sure to usher in a new age! Japan’s dawn is nigh. Fly into the world, Colosseum! The first battle of that brilliant vision begins now!!!!!!”

[Search Engine] From a Security Company Intercom [Absolute NOAH]

“Onii-chan left,” said Ayumi in the entranceway. “Onee-chan, you understand that Onii-chan has no chance of winning, right? He’s almost certain to fail and then his life will be in danger.”

“Well, it is true that real life isn’t like a melodrama.”

But Erika had more to say.

“But how could we stop him? Weren’t we both always hoping and praying for this when we were trapped in that dark space underground? Hoping and praying that a knight in shining armor we had never met would come to save us?”

That knight had not arrived in time for them.

Erika and Ayumi had bravely paved their own way to survival.

But what if someone was becoming that knight now? And what if there was some other girl who had no choice but to wait for that knight in shining armor?

“There’s really nothing we can do about this.”

“Yeah, but what if Onii-chan is captured by the Bright Cross?”

“Oh? I think you know exactly what we do then, Ayumi-chan.”

The sisters smiled cheerfully together.

And those residents of the night answered in unison.

“If it comes to that, we’ll have to drown the world in a sea of blood.”

“If it comes to that, we’ll have to drown the world in a sea of blood.”

Chapter 2

Part 1

It had begun.

It had finally begun.

A fight to the death being broadcast live nationwide. The Bright Cross pitted Archenemies against each other to dispose of them.

Level 4. The Colosseum.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Karen-chan here will be your host tonight!! And for some high-level analysis, we’ve brought in experts in the fields of martial arts, biology, religion, and more!”

The blue bunny girl continued her mic performance.

Even if the start time was 10, that apparently did not meant the actual fight would begin then. It seemed to be like the live broadcast of an international volleyball match. And I wasn’t going to sit there and listen to the lengthy ceremony.

I probably had 15-30 minutes…no, even less.

Whatever the case, I had to make the best of it.

“Itou-san, take this!”

“?”

After an official took the blonde girl from the cage, I handed her a small headset.

“At this point, we just have to do this. So focus on surviving, Itou-

san!”

“…”

The small girl tried to say something, but it looked like the words wouldn’t come out. The officials grabbed her on either side and tossed her into the transparent bug cage with her glass wand in hand.

I hated it.

But it wasn’t over yet. We still had a chance.

It was only a thin, thin thread, but we couldn’t give up hope yet!!

“Maxwell. Let’s start by checking both sides’ specs. A witch and a mermaid. That sounds like a combination from a fairy tale, but what can they actually do and how much can they do with it?”

“Sure. First of all, Western and Eastern mermaids are very different, but since they are pitting her against a witch, it should be a fairly safe assumption that this is a Western mermaid.”

Maxwell communicated using a short text SNS, so he could not send much text at once. He instead sent message after message.

“With that in mind, a Western mermaid lures sailors into the ocean with her song. There are a variety of theories as to why they drag the sailors down to the ocean bottom: to eat the human, to gather mates, to eliminate an external enemy, etc. In each case, there is no chance of escape once you have been dragged down. The few known countermeasures are all ways to prevent the mermaid’s song from luring you in, so there is no mention of how to recover after falling into the ocean.”

“Where did you get this data from?”

“Sure. Randomly from the internet.”

Page after page displayed and they were from both personal and corporate sites. Some were even web novel sites and encyclopedia-format game walkthrough sites. Some had a harp and some didn’t and the design of their swimsuit-like outfit changed, but all of them had a woman with a fish tail for legs singing as she sat on a stone jutting up from the ocean surface. And as I looked at it, one thought came to mind.

…Could we really rely on this?

This wasn’t walkthrough information for a game we could retry as many times as it took. This wasn’t a message board post of someone who thought they knew what they were doing and made a fool of themselves.

This was a life.

A human life was riding on this decision and all I had was online information gathered by who even knows who?

“No, I can’t just stop here. I have to make a decision. Maxwell, what about the witch? And is a witch even an Archenemy?”

“Sure. During the age of the witch hunts and the inquisition, witches were already legally known as nonhuman, so they could be subjected to various tortures, executed, or stripped of their property. In other words, their ‘human’ rights were taken from them.”

“Is Itou Helen a medieval witch?”

“No. That was merely an example. If the official announcement was accurate, she is a Circe witch. Circe is spoken of in Greek mythology.”

“Be more specific.”

“Circe mixed a special potion that could remake humans into animals or grotesque monsters. It was identical to the way the Greek gods punished humans. And those who have inherited those techniques are classified as Circe witches.”

…

I see. So that’s why.

It had honestly seemed weird to me that witches were classified as Archenemies alongside vampires and zombies.

“Maxwell. Give me the definition of the undead…of Archenemies.”

“Sure. 1. A life form that has surpassed the limits of known biology and has a lifespan either infinitely or immeasurably long. 2. A life form created from or by a human. 3. A life form that’s individual traits present a risk of spreading to or infecting unrelated people around it. The details can change somewhat depending on the exact conditions, but that is the general definition.”

“They stole the technique of the gods and spread it throughout earth. By transforming humans with a divine potion, they count as a source of infection.”

Looking at it that way, it made sense that they were classified the same as vampires and zombies.

“Then let’s get to the crux of the issue. …Is Itou Helen really a witch? Or did the Bright Cross just make that up?”

“It is hard to say.”

It was rare for Maxwell to not give a clear yes or no answer.

“Her medical records show she was once hospitalized for a broken bone and the flu. And her recovery was within the average range. But…”

“But?”

“The patients in the same room as her recovered quickly. Or rather, the drugs they were treated with worked too well and with no side effects.”

She was a human herself, but she could change those around her.

That was a witch.

“I can surmise that she escaped notice until now due to that unusual pattern. A video site contains a video of a parrot Itou Helen looked after as the school’s student animal caretaker. Someone secretly filmed her wrapping a bandage around the injured bird only for it to recover at unnatural speed. This may have been when they discovered her.”

…What was she doing?

She had been caught because she was saving the lives of others? That was what did it? How did that make her a monster?

No.

It was possible Itou Helen had been unaware of her power or true nature before she was captured by the Bright Cross.

She may have found it odd how quickly the bird was recovering and merely been delighted by the small miracle.

Was that really an evil that needed eliminating?

I was much more disgusted that someone at our school had

secretly filmed the girl, released it without her permission, and then creepily criticized her with their gossiping curiosity hidden by a thin veil of supposed justice. Was that only because I had Archenemies in my family?

“User, the Bright Cross is the world’s largest international organization with a powerful influence on humanitarian and medical fields.” Maxwell calmly interjected. “They are officially registered as a non-profit organization, but they receive considerable donations from pharmaceutical companies and medical equipment producers the world over. That is likely because they have a great impact on rulings concerning pharmaceutical decisions, welfare standards, and health insurance.”

“Get to the point.”

“Sure. From their perspective, the speed of recovery is unimportant. But they need their products to be as effective as the data says they should be. If someone near Itou Helen were to collapse, their product could be criticized. An unstable miracle is only a risk from a business perspective. …Isn’t it possible that this was influenced by those who think like that?”

I couldn’t believe it.

As the data says? A risk from a business perspective? That was only a theory, but it was still too much!

Itou Helen hadn’t done anything herself. The people around her had apparently recovered, but there had been no negative effects to their health. And yet she was being sent to the gallows because of a hypothetical?

“Understood, Maxwell. Whatever the details might be, Itou Helen is definitely an Archenemy, right? These aren’t false accusations and she really can do it?”

“Sure. In all likelihood.”

“Then what can a witch do? You said something about Circe making potions that remake people into animals, but…”

That was when the lights on the ceiling changed direction. The intense light dazzled me. And atop the giant transparent die-shaped bug cage, the blue bunny girl raised her ecstatic voice with microphone in hand.

“Now then, now then! The atmosphere has started to heat up in here, so let’s end the talk and get to the main event. Witch vs. Mermaid! Who will win!? Whether here, in the live viewing theater, or in front of the TV, get those tickets ready!! This is the cutting edge mixed species martial arts tournament: the Colosseum!!”

“Goddammit…!!”

Whatever we were going to do, we had no time.

Itou Helen had some power, but she was not even aware of it. At this rate, she was no different from a normal high school girl who looked after the animals. She would be tormented to death by the mermaid who wrapped her hair around her bare skin and could breathe underwater!

“This would be pointless if both sides couldn’t take advantage of their strengths! To make things fair for Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid, the ring will be filled with water to a depth of 1 meter.”

…

“And in exchange, Itou Helen the Witch will be given 42 different chemicals free of charge! Okay, you two! Show off your utterly inhuman and entirely unrealistic powers as Archenemies!!”

To hell with you!

I brought my smartphone to my mouth and shouted into it.

But I was speaking to Itou Helen in the bug cage and not Maxwell.

“Itou-san! Can you think of a way to use those chemicals!?”

“Um, uh, umm…”

The voice reaching my smartphone via the headset on her ear did not sound very hopeful. Of course it didn’t. What were those colorful bottles sitting on a silver cart? Cocktail ingredients and even fluorescent paint would have looked less threatening. And she was surrounded by water up to her waist. If those were powerful chemicals, using them wrong and dropping some around her would be dangerous!

Meanwhile, the situation refused to wait around.

The woman named Karen said more.

“It’s time for the valuable first battle of a new age! This death match has no time limit! I hope you’re excited!!”

A low, deep buzzer rang like when a prison door opened.

That signaled the beginning of the match.

But that was blown away only a moment later.

It was the mermaid.

It was the queen of the sea who had her slender body wrapped in her own long hair.

Irregular ripples ran across the surface of the water filling the die-shaped bug cage and then small white cracks covered every single reinforced glass surface. This was not Itou Helen the Witch who

could not move. It was the first attack from Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid.

But she was not controlling the water.

Nor was this a power to destroy glass.

It was a song.

It was soundwaves.

It was the pressure from those waves.

Unlike my vampire older sister or zombie younger sister, mermaids did not actually remake their opponent's body. But their song could break through a stormy night, win over wartime sailors, and manipulate them into falling into the ocean. The sailors offered their own lives. In that way, the mermaid was a source of infection. An Archenemy that controlled people.

"Agwah!?"

There was an explosive sound so dangerously loud that it nearly broke the smartphone speaker only indirectly playing it. And with that smartphone to my ear, I had to cover my ears and double over.

But.

That sound.

It wasn't coming from Kuroyama Hinoki and her great mermaid's song!?

The girl with wavy shoulder-length blonde hair was cowering down and trembling like a small animal. But around Itou Helen, a scarlet blast of flames swept in a horizontal crescent moon shape and that explosive blast pushed back the mermaid's song!?

“Rechecking Itou Helen’s words. There was an unnatural waver in the amplitude of her voice. I estimate she was having trouble breathing due to extreme tension.”

Maxwell sent several messages to the screen.

“When you asked her if she could think of a way to use those chemicals, she grew nervous but not because she did not know how. She likely hesitated because she could instinctually tell how to use them at a glance.”

“…!!”

Knowing that was a type of proof.

Just like a vampire was sensitive to the smell of blood and a zombie to the taste of flesh, that witch could just tell how to use those suspicious-looking chemicals. And she had despaired at that fact.

I was speechless as I watched Itou Helen adjust her grip on the glass wand made of countless transparent tubes and protuberances. She stuck the openings of the colorful bottles into a trumpet or trombone-like collection of pipes and vigorously operated several pistons like she was playing a musical instrument.

The colorful liquids were separated out by color as they passed through the clear tubes like it was a roller coaster and I finally felt like I could see what that glass wand was.

“What…is that? A vertical siphon coffee maker?”

“Sure. Analysis complete. The concept is the same. It provides heating and cooling. It also allows for distillation and fractionation using steam. It contains the burner, reflux condenser, and three neck flask needed for all that. It also supports pressurization and decompression using air compression.”

“And what does that mean!?”

“That one device contains everything found in your high school’s chemistry lab. It should be enough to create a simple chemical weapon. An impressive display by a medical organization like the Bright Cross.”

And an impressive display by Itou Helen for using it so well the first time she touched it.

Computers and smartphones were so convenient that people could be overwhelmed by their many services, but I didn’t see any hesitation of that sort.

Meanwhile, the small witch continued releasing combinations of colorful chemicals from the glass wand. Each time, a mass of flames or a tornado of vacuum blades would sweep across the inside of the bug cage.

How was Itou Helen herself viewing this?

Was she proud that she was someone special?

Her back looked even smaller than before, so I seriously doubted it.

And the mermaid…Kuroyama Hinoki was not just sitting idly by.

Her song was apparently not her only weapon. However, she could not control all of the water to sweep the attacks away with a water gun.

It was something much more unexpected.

The tail fin created from the long hair around her legs slapped the water’s surface, and…

“What!?”

They were rocks.

The bug cage's floor and the water's surface were split by several sharp rocks that jutted up in front of the mermaid like a giant shark's teeth. They acted as a shield and deflected the mass of fire that Itou Helen had summoned.

She could control rocks?

Even though she was a mermaid that lived in the ocean?

No.

"Maxwell, show me the mermaid pictures. Weren't they all sitting on a rock as they sang?"

"Sure. What about it?"

Needless to say, the mermaids that lured sailors off their ship or dragged them and their boat down were anthropomorphized versions of shipwrecks. They tended to appear in difficult locations such as reefs or straits.

But that meant mermaids weren't symbols of the ocean or water.

They were rocks.

They were reefs.

They hid below the surface, struck the ship before they were noticed, opened a hole in the hull, and mercilessly took the lives of the crew. They were the anthropomorphized version of those sharp rocks.

In that case, this was bad.

One of them might "jut up" directly below Itou Helen.

No.

There was another issue.

“Where did the mermaid herself go!?”

She was gone.

She must have sensed that her song would just be pushed back, but if she had run away, where had she gone?

That was obvious.

Kuroyama Hinoki was a mermaid.

Her slender body was wrapped in her long hair to form the tail fin needed to swim freely through the water. And the bug cage was filled with a meter of water.

Worst of all, the mermaid sending the sailor into the ocean and sinking the ship with her song and reef were only the beginning. The preparation. Hadn’t it been said that the real threat was when she bared their fangs and preyed on the fallen humans?

I didn’t have time to yell a warning into my smartphone.

Her small body suddenly vanished. Into the water. It was as unnatural as someone being dragged from a car by a rope around their ankle.

The blue bunny girl rejoiced.

“What’s this!? Has this battle between girls super-evolved into a watery swimming tournament!? Then here’s hoping for some wardrobe malfunctions!! That’s bound to do wonders for our ratings!!”

Shut the hell up.

Why did she have to be so hot? If I wasn't careful, I felt like my soul would be taken away by her cleavage and the curves of her hips.

I sent a mental curse her way and shouted into my smartphone.

"Itou-san! She eats people after dragging them underwater. That means you're safe if you leave the water. Use wind or something. Yes, can't you make a potion that lets you fly!?"

"No. If Itou Helen is a Circe witch, then that is the wrong method." Maxwell calmly rejected my idea. "As Circe is from Greek mythology, she can likely use the concept that all things are made from the four great elements of fire, water, wind, and earth. This has nothing to do with the laws of physics or chemical formulas. I can only call it the occult. That is how Archenemies work."

"And? We don't have time here, Maxwell!"

"Sure. Directly using fire, water, wind, and earth is the same as directly eating sugar or flour. The flavor and nutrition absorption is more efficient when it is reworked into bread or cake. Is that a simple enough explanation?"

"But what's your point? What is the equivalent of 'cooking' for a Circe witch…for Itou Helen!?"

"Needless to say, that is a potion that remakes humans into an animal or monster."

In other words, a reproduction of the gods' punishment for humans.

"There is a monster known as the Scylla. It was originally a beautiful girl, but she was given a grotesque form by one of Circe's potions and she ultimately ruled the sea and killed 6 heroes. It would likely

be more efficient to have Itou Helen herself take the potion than to use it against the mermaid.”

We weren’t talking about a tiger’s claws or a shark’s teeth here. We would be turning her into a great demon lord that had sent a whole group of legendary heroes to their graves.

If so…

“Itou Helen should know how to use the chemicals. Check encyclopedias of animals, dinosaurs, or whatever else. Just search all the archives that might provide her inspiration!”

“Sure.”

We had no time.

A human could only survive a few minutes underwater. But that was when a trained professional attempted it with a stopwatch in one hand. If an amateur was pulled underwater without warning, they might breathe water into their lungs right off the bat.

I just hoped the headset still worked.

I recalled what I had watched on the living room TV with Erika and Ayumi. We had debated it with a snack in one hand. What was the strongest animal? Ayumi went for the large herbivores like hippos and elephants and Erika went for the oceanic carnivores like sharks and killer whales, but what had I said?

“Anyway, getting that mermaid off of her comes first.”

“This is an underwater battle, so would a shark be best?”

“No, an octopus or squid would be more efficient for getting the mermaid off. Itou-san! Can you hear me, Itou-san!?”

There was no response.

And I doubted it was just that she couldn't open her mouth underwater. If all she had to do was send a sign, she only had to tap at the headset with her fingertip.

"She seems to be refusing to respond."

Why?

Could she not trust us?

No, even then it was odd. She had been dragged underwater and would not live another 100 seconds at this rate. Whether she trusted us or not, she would want any information she could get. Like a drowning man grasping at straws.

Then what was this?

I had to read the thoughts in Itou Helen's heart.

On the verge of death, she wouldn't have it in her to take a detour on a whim. This had to be something worth risking her life over. And unless I figured that out, our words would never each her.

…

Wait, could it be…?

"Maxwell."

"Sure."

"Give me this data. That will probably work."

I remembered what I had proposed as the strongest animal when discussing it with my sisters.

I took in a deep breath and released it to drive out as much of the tension in my chest as I could.

And I spoke.

“Itou-san, please listen.”

It didn’t matter whether she responded or not.

I only had to know that she was listening.

“I was only thinking about saving you before. To be honest, that hasn’t changed. But if this is what you want, I can point you to a different way.”

It could be a single second or a single instant.

It just had to reach her in time.

Before the final moment.

“So even if you feel like I’m deceiving you, please hear me out. I can only submit one option to you and it isn’t a tiger or a lion. It’s…”

……
……

I heard the water splitting.

It came from the smartphone and the headset it was connected to, so that meant Itou Helen had brought her head above water.

And if someone had won, that meant someone had lost.

“Ohhh? What could this be?”

As the distant camera zoomed in toward her, the blue bunny girl

voiced her confusion while pointlessly leaning in toward the camera, tilting her head, and emphasizing her cleavage.

The answer soon arrived.

Someone else silently and shockingly calmly floated up to the surface.

It was the mermaid.

Kuroyama Hinoki.

Now that she had lost consciousness, she must have lost control of the long, long hair wrapped around her because it gradually came undone as it floated in the water.

“Would you look at that! She’s floating there just like a dead fish! But what could have happened in the water there? Surely the mermaid didn’t drown!!”

The sound of something whizzing through the air provided the answer.

It came from Itou Helen, the witch with a glass wand.

Several long, thick, and transparent tails rose from around her small butt like a nine-tailed fox.

They were jellyfish tentacles.

Part 2

“I really think a venomous animal can’t be beat.”

That was what I had said in the living room.

Ayumi suggested a hippo or an elephant while Erika suggested a shark or a killer whale. But as I watched the TV program, I suggested a different candidate for the strongest animal.

“It can be a hornet, a scorpion, a pit viper, or a habu, but they can kill a human several dozen times their size, right?”

“But, but. A bear will dig up hornet’s nests to get at the honey. It’ll writhe around after being stung all over, but the cute thing won’t stop lapping up the honey.”

“No, hornets don’t gather honey, so isn’t the bear eating the larvae? Hornet babies look disgusting, but they’re really nutritious.”

“Eh, ehhh!? No…no, that can’t be. Don’t destroy my vision of the cute bearrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”

“Anyway…”

A great variety of animals were venomous, but there was generally another animal that their venom was useless against. Like the bear that attacked the hornet’s nest through brute force or the small clownfish that lived symbiotically with the anemone.

But.

There was just one animal with the ultimate venom that lacked any such exceptions.

“The Irukandji jellyfish. A deadly jellyfish found in the ocean near Australia. They’re less than 2cm long and can slip through the shark nets set up around swimming areas, but they’re covered in venomous stingers that can kill a human with a single prick. There is no chance of survival like with a habu serum. They’re transparent, so they can’t be seen. And the young ones are less than a tenth the size of a grain of rice, so they can slip through any net. I think they’re the strongest. I want to meet one them even less than a tiger or shark.”

Part 3

Everyone was shocked.

But that did not matter.

Everyone was more worried about the ticket clutched in their hand than seeing an exciting battle. And the result was now known. No matter how it had happened, their bets would now pay off (or not).

An earth-shaking cheer arrived a moment later.

Even if they couldn't follow what had happened, they could not call the match off now. The blue bunny girl atop the bug cage went along with it.

She hopped up and down on the spot, allowing her ample breasts to bounce on her slender frame to a needless extent.

"What's this, what's this!? We just had an upset that entirely ignored the odds! This match was conquered by Itou Helen, the small animal of a girl who looks like she couldn't hurt a fly! From the looks of that, did she use a venomous stinger on a jellyfish tentacle? That's far crueler than it looks, but that's why it fooled everyone! The electrode attached to her opponent has already confirmed cardiac arrest!! She ended this perfectly!!"

On the opposite corner of the square bug cage, I saw a young man scream as he fell to his knees. What was he to that mermaid named Kuroyama Hinoki? Her family, her friend, or her lover? I didn't know. I only knew that Archenemy also had someone willing to weep for her.

Was he experiencing what I would if I watched Erika or Ayumi breathe their last for some show business?

He might kill me.

I didn't even know his name, but I was somehow certain of that.

And there was no stopping now.

I had to "settle" this before the passion of payback cooled.

On the ground, I shouted up at the rainforest butterfly blue bunny girl who looked down at us all from above the bug cage.

"Hey!"

"Yes, yes. You're the witch's second, aren't you? What's the matter? You got the first win you wanted so badly, so you need to smile! Smile!!"

I entirely ignored her big round eyes and the lightly clenched fists in front of her cheeks.

"I want to confirm our reward."

"This was her first win, so Itou Helen will be awarded 10 million yen. That's the base amount and it doubles with each consecutive win. We can discuss the details of the payment method off camera, can't we?"

"That isn't all."

I breathed in and out.

And I made myself a monster to achieve my goal.

"The winner is given the body of the loser. And we're free to use it

however we want: eat it, use it as an ingredient, or whatever else. That's what you said, so don't forget it."

"Ah ha ha! Of course. Archenemies aren't human, so abandoning and damaging their corpses aren't crimes. And the Bright Cross keeps its promises. But, but. Eating a Western mermaid won't make you immortal, you know?"

"How we're going to use it is none of your concern."

That was all.

Our conversation was interrupted by a great indescribable cry that could not be expressed with any known emotion. Needless to say, it came from the young man who was our opponent's second.

We were desecrating the mermaid's corpse.

But I'm sorry. You lost, so you have no right to do anything here. So just shut up and watch.

Under the bright spotlight, the blue bunny girl wiped sweat from her brow (showing off her armpit as she did) and cackled.

"Well, I'm sure the witch can use it for something. Or is this for your…interests, boy? Come to think of it, she does have a pretty tempting body☆ Well, we won't look into it. That's the right of the victor! You can just chuck her in a dumpster for all we care!!"

The blue bunny girl brought it to an end and her every word rubbed me the wrong way.

"Now then, now then. That brings this match to an end! Whether you won or lost money tonight, let's enjoy another exciting night at the Colosseum next time!! Okay, everyone! Have a good night. Adieu!!"

Part 4

In a cold room, “that” was delivered on a rolling stretcher like it was hotel room service.

The pale delivery lay motionless on its back with a white sheet covering it up to the chest.

It was the mermaid.

Kuroyama Hinoki.

“R-really?”

In her witch costume and holding her glass wand, Itou Helen spoke weakly as she trembled nervously.

“She’s really…ours now…?”

“Yeah, I made sure that bunny girl said so. And on a national broadcast. They can’t overturn that decision now no matter what happens.”

There was no one else here.

When I told them not to bother me because I wanted to have some fun, the officials all gave me sleazy smiles and left.

I seriously hoped they all died.

And then we faced the loser.

The corpse spoke.

“Kah…hah! Ugweh!? Cough, cough cough!!”

She started coughing right on schedule, like an alarm clock had woken her.

This had been Itou Helen’s “request”.

A tiger or lion wouldn’t work. She refused to use a shark or killer whale. She hadn’t wanted to fight at all. She hadn’t wanted to kill. So even after being dragged underwater by the mermaid with only a few dozen seconds of life left, she had refused to kill for her own survival.

Even after I realized that, it hadn’t been easy.

We had needed to end the match without killing Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid. We couldn’t have them declaring a no contest and then starting a rematch. We had to definitively end it while also freeing the loser from that bug cage.

And this was the result.

Venom could put someone in a state of apparent death.

And the winner had the right to retrieve the loser’s body.

Put those two together and we could save her.

We could help a life escape that cruel Colosseum.

And I was glad it had worked.

Since it was based on that killer jellyfish, there had been a chance we could not revive her.

And as the mermaid gathered the sheets in front of her chest, I noticed how good looking she was. I had been too distracted during

the battle, but the bulges below that sheet suggested she could give my older sister a run for her money.

I was glad we hadn't killed her.

"I'm…cough!? What happened…to the match…?

"It's fine."

Whatever the case, I was glad I had time for those more unnecessary thoughts. It meant I had escaped that insane life-or-death situation.

So I didn't have to say much.

I wasn't going to ask for anything in return.

"It's over. All of it is. You can go back home. That's all you need to know."

The mermaid clearly did not understand, but I still turned to face the small witch instead.

"We won't be able to do this every time. Once the Bright Cross catches on, they'll figure out a countermeasure."

"I…know that…"

Also, there was no exit from the Colosseum. There was no rule releasing you after winning a certain number of battles.

If you didn't die, you had to keep fighting until you did.

Again and again, you would be thrown into a cage with another Archenemy and made to fight them to the death. That system made sure no one survived for long.

It was an execution system.

The sports tournament format was nothing more than camouflage.

So following the rules wasn't enough. We were only buying time here. I could walk freely outside, so there was something I had to do while Itou Helen's life was temporarily saved.

This insane Colosseum was being boldly presented to the public. But to pull off something like this, they had to have a systems to distort information and people's impressions of the event. If I found and destroyed that, everyone would realize what should have been obvious: that this was wrong. And their voices would become a great pressure that truly freed Itou Helen and the other Archenemies.

I heard a knock on the door.

Was it a Colosseum official or security?

Whatever the case, it would be difficult to kick down the door and break through. Even if I had a justification for Kuroyama Hinoki, I couldn't bring Itou Helen out with me.

And if I struggled here and they had to suppress me, I would lose the thin, thin thread of connection provided by my position as her second.

"…"

I had to destroy them.

I had to have known that from the beginning. Even if I did manage to get Itou Helen out of here, what would that accomplish? Even if she gave up her home and went into hiding, the Bright Cross's influence spread to more than 100 countries. Even abandoning everything in her life and living life on the run was not enough.

Running away wouldn’t cut it.

If we didn’t stand up to them, we would end up cornered.

We had no time.

We wouldn’t be able to talk freely for much longer.

And so I briefly asked what mattered most.

“Even so, I’d like to know what you think. Am I a worthy partner? Can you trust me?”

Her answer was simple.

Itou Helen and I exchanged a handshake.

[Search Engine] The Red-Faced Sage [Absolute NOAH]

It’s awful.

Oh, honestly. It’s just awful.

What’s wrong? Why are you looking so gloomy on such a cheerful night? Hah hah! Oh, is that what happened? You lost!? You should have listened to what this tipster told you and bet everything you had on the witch.

Listen, there are a lot of different Archenemies.

For example, mermaids are a symbol of shipwrecks, death at sea, and things like that. They swallow up groups of humans by dragging the living into the dark sea.

But a Circe witch is a little different.

Potions that turn humans into monsters? A genius woman that stole the gods’ punishments and recreated them with secret potions? That’s honestly all extra. It doesn’t matter. There’s more to the legends of Circe than just the animal potions.

It’s said that Circe took the souls of heroes to the island of the blissful.

Well, you could say it’s like heaven. Heaven in Greek mythology is full of Zeus, Hera, and all those pain-in-the-ass gods, so it’d probably be pretty uncomfortable for a human, but the island if the blissful is a true paradise where not even Zeus can reach you. I think it was ruled by Cronus.

In other words, this was a mermaid that kills you by dragging you into the sea and a witch that takes you to heaven.

It's obvious which one was of a higher grade. The mermaid never stood a chance.

Her name was Itou Helen, right? If she really is a Circe witch, then she's going to make a mess of this Colosseum some more. After all, Circe fished up the heroes – those who fought hard on the battlefield – to reward them. She's perfect for a Colosseum, right?

You say none of this helps now that it's over?

Yeah, you're right. But the next match awaits you! Now, that's all for tonight!! Whether you listened to me and won big or ignored me and regret it, don't forget this night! If you want to make money the smart way, make sure you listen to what this tipster has to tell you!!

Chapter 3

Part 1

It was over.

The following morning arrived.

“Onii-chan. It’s morning.”

“Nn.”

Ayumi obediently came to wake me, so I rubbed my eyes and got out of bed.

I had thought I wouldn’t be able to sleep, but my nerves must have been worn down despite how worked up my mind had been. I didn’t remember turning it off, but it was a little past the time I had set on the alarm clock. All that noise had apparently failed to rouse me.

I stepped out into the hallway with my little sister and passed by my older sister in her uniform. However, she was not preparing to go to school. As a vampire, she was part of the night group and was actually getting back from school.

“Erika, you need to get in your coffin soon.”

“Mhh. But I’m feeling faint because I’m so worried about you, Satori-kun…”

Erika really was wobbling on her feet on her way to her room which had thick light-blocking curtains on the window. Was she really going to change into her pajamas like that? It looked like she was only going to partially strip off her uniform and then climb into the

coffin created in the storage space below the bed.

As I watched her disappear through the door, Ayumi spoke up.

“It might be hard to tell since we’re the undead…”

“Yeah?”

“But you need to remember that your family is worried about you, Onii-chan. Ahh, this is when I hate being too healthy to get bags under my eyes…”

I felt bad.

But I couldn’t back off from this. I couldn’t let Itou Helen or the other Archenemies be tormented to death on camera.

I had to end this before Ayumi or Erika ended up in the middle of it. I couldn’t compromise on this.

We went downstairs where mom and dad were. Everyone but Erika ate breakfast together.

My stepmom lazily spoke up while watching the weather forecast.

“Oh? We’re going to have quite a few sunny days in a row. That’s unusual for this city. Maybe I should hang the laundry up to dry instead of using the dryer.”

It seemed to only be a quick forecast between news segments because the camera moved back to the announcer. A sports commentator was speaking cheerfully on the TV. And along with the scores of baseball and soccer games…

“Man, that Colosseum has finally gotten started. Times really have changed. I never even liked doing the soccer lottery because it felt too much like betting on sports, but it looks like they aren’t running

the business on just the owner system and priority broadcast rights anymore. Now, the first match was Itou Helen the Witch vs. Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid. And the winner was-…”

My dad spoke with his eyes on his folded-up newspaper and his chopsticks poking at his stir-fried vegetables.

“How unpleasant.”

That was all he said, but it still felt like I had someone supporting me. After being thrown into the malicious and passionate Colosseum, I had been on the verge of losing faith in humankind, but I wasn’t the only one that felt this way. That was all it was.

What about Ayumi?

What did she feel after hearing her family say that?

I stole a glance, but I didn’t notice any change to her expression.

After eating breakfast, I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and combed my hair. I prepared to go to school like normal.

Ayumi had changed into her sailor-style uniform and she was stuffing a bunch of deodorant spray into her school bag.

“It must be tough being a girl.”

“Tell me about it. Fuguu. Did you think a girls school smells of sweets and tea? It’s mostly chemical smells! And it’s no laughing matter when parents’ day rolls around.”

I had meant it sarcastically, but she took it seriously. *Please don’t crush my dreams about private girls schools.* And then Ayumi circled around in front of me. In fact, she walked right up in front of me.

“You know how you can’t notice your own smell? And I’m a zombie on top of that. I-I smell all right, don’t I? I don’t smell weird?”

“…Oh, honestly.”

The usual ritual had begun.

It wasn’t every single day, but this always happened when Ayumi started growing uneasy. And she couldn’t relax until the ritual was complete.

I had no choice but to pull Ayumi’s slender body in toward me. I brought my face to her neck like I was our vampire sister.

“Ah…”

Ayumi’s skinny shoulders jumped slightly.

But I wasn’t biting her to suck her blood.

Sniff, sniff.

“Wait. I know I was the one to ask, but don’t make any noise…”

She gave off the nice smell of a girl’s hair.

It was a sweet smell, like the soap, hairspray, and hint of sweat had triggered a chemical reaction.

But as a zombie, Ayumi was hypersensitive to being said she had any kind of smell at all, so I gave my standard response.

“I don’t smell anything.”

“Really? You don’t have a stuffed-up nose or anything?”

“If you can’t believe anything I say, then I won’t even bother

checking anymore.”

“Fuguu. Well, as long as you aren’t just being nice…”

?

Ayumi looked kind of uncomfortable. Almost like a child who had gotten separated from her parents in a crowd.

That was when I realized she had never asked anyone else to perform this ritual. Not even Erika.

I didn’t really understand, but I knew rubbing her head would cheer her up. She was simple like that.

“Uuh… Wh-why are you doing that all of a sudden?”

“No reason. It just seemed like a good time for it.”

“Well, stop it. I just finished with my hair and now you’re messing it up. Fuguu…”

That was generally how it went.

We left through the front door, but since we attended different schools, we didn’t take the same route.

While I undid the latch on my collapsible bike, Ayumi started to run.

“Bye, Onii-chan. I’ll be going.”

“Bye.”

She didn’t like smelling sweaty, but she did like jogging. Maybe she went right to the shower room after getting to school. As her big brother, I was mostly worried about how short her skirt was.

After she ran off, I dragged my collapsible bike out onto the road. That was when I came across an unexpected face.

“Huh? Class Rep?”

“Good morning, Satori-kun.”

She had long black hair, a prominent forehead, and glasses. She was skinny and slender, but the mounds on her chest were quite noticeable for how small they were. She was a childhood friend who felt like the perfect Japanese Class Rep.

“Well, this is unusual. You usually get to school earlier than this. Did you oversleep?”

Just because she was the childhood friend next door did not mean we walked to school hand-in-hand every day. There was something different about her than Erika or Ayumi. There was some mysterious barrier around her that made my heart pound whenever I got close, so I couldn’t stand to be around her all the time!

But the Class Rep completely ignored the secret pact we had made ever since entering middle school.

“Yes. I was waiting for you today.”

“Ehh!? What do you mean!? …Um, actually I really would like to know why you were waiting outside my house with a wooden sword in hand. Y-you’re a 2nd Dan in kendo aren’t you?”

“Karate 1st Dan, Kendo 2nd Dan, Judo 2nd Dan, and Aikido 1st Dan. Got that!?”

…Why did the Class rep end up being such an active person?

But no matter how I felt, she smiled at me (with wooden sword in

hand).

And she said it.

“Hey, Satori-kun. What is the Forehead Glasses Class Rep Swimsuit Dance File Set?”

Ma-…

“Maxwellllllll

thing I wanted to do.

And more importantly…

“I heard some rather exciting voices coming from next door last night. It was those sisters of yours. Were you not with them?”

“?”

“I think they were yelling angrily at the TV, but I definitely heard them saying, ‘I can understand doing it for the Forehead Glasses Class Rep Swimsuit Dance File Set, but you’re willing to risk your life for some random Archenemy you ran across!? Gnhh!!’ ”

Ah…

“Them…!!”

“Stop, stop. You’re not the one who’s angry here. I’m the one that deserves to be angry. …So what is this swimsuit dance file set? Depending on your answer, Satori-kun, you might just learn firsthand that Archenemies aren’t the only ones that can demonstrate surprising strength.”

“Ah, ahhhh!?”

Not good. I’m about to get the cutest beating!

But I couldn’t escape even if I took off running now. Even with my collapsible bike, she would hit me with a *men*, *do*, and *kote* in the time it took me to climb onto the seat and start pedaling. *What do I do? What am I supposed to do!? Dammit, am I really this powerless without Maxwell!?*

I could only pray at this point.

I’m willing to take a hit or two, so at least give me a gust of wind!

Blow the Class Rep's skirt nice and high!!

A moment later, a nice gust of wind really did blow right between the Class Rep's legs and the skirt before my eyes floated up to fully reveal everything below.

"…"

"…"

We both fell silent for a while.

It had happened so suddenly that the Class Rep had not been able to hold down the fluttering cloth. She stood tall with her hands on her hips, so I could not have had a better view. By the way, the holy item was pure white. As a true Japanese Class Rep, she did not unfaithfully go for some cheap stripes. Seeing the small red ribbon decorating the front was as refreshing as seeing the first sunrise of the year from a mountain peak.

Since I was sitting right in front of her, I had seen everything. And from a low angle.

I'll be honest.

I wanted to thank god.

The Bright Cross, Colosseum, and Archenemy stuff might have been difficult, but I felt reinvigorated enough to keep going for another year.

After a few seconds, the skirt fluttered back down as if gravity had finally kicked back in. Today's wonderfully cool and exciting event was over.

The Class Rep hung her head and her long black hair seemed to ripple from invisible static electricity.

“…Satori-kun…?”

“No, wait! Wait, Class Rep! It wouldn’t make sense to hit me with a *men*, *do*, and *kote* for this! There’s no scientific evidence to show our prayers can affect the wind!!”

“In other words, you were hoping that would happen? And here I thought we were having a serious discussion.”

K-kyahh!! I shouldn’t have said that! I feel like anything I say is going to lead to major damage now!!

If my life starting flashing before my eyes as I trembled on the ground, I wondered if all I would see was the color white, that ribbon, those bright thighs, and the wrinkles in the cloth. That might be fun and it was the only positive thing my mind could find right now.

And then…

“Ahem!”

I heard someone clearing their throat.

I turned around along with the Class Rep who had threatened me with a wooden sword, dragged me behind the house, and showed me her panties. (It sounds a lot more fun when I put it like that.)

We found…a girl?

She wore a plain varsity jacket and jeans, her long black hair was stuffed inside a hat, and her sex was hard to tell with her face hidden behind sunglasses and a mask. Or it would have been if not for the impressive volume of her chest. …And because a guy would probably get reported to the police if he dressed that suspiciously.

But who was it?

If she was not up to no good, why would she be dressed like that? It reminded me of the clichéd disguise of an entertainer or idol who wanted to keep her identity hidden in a drama.

“Um, uh. As a girl, I really hate to stop this, but since she has a weapon, should I intervene? However it happened, you did save me, so I would like to pay you back.”

“Wait a second… That black hair in the hat…”

It was still hard to tell with her face covered, but now that it occurred to me…

“Yes, I should have introduced myself first.”

Didn’t I know one of the undead who had appeared before the TV cameras with her long, long hair wrapped around her body like a swimsuit and around her legs like a giant tail fin?

“I’m Kuroyama Hinoki. As you know, I am the mermaid Archenemy you defeated and rescued.”

Part 2

An Archenemy.

The term originally referred to Satan in a certain monotheistic religion. From there, it apparently started being used in reference to any “demon lord” in general.

It now referred to someone who had surpassed the concept of a lifespan or could spread that to the people around them. It was the general term for someone who was the source of an undead disease.

For example, my vampire older sister or my zombie younger sister.

“An Archenemy? Satori-kun, are you getting yourself into trouble again?”

The intrusion of this third party had cooled the Class Rep’s head, so she tossed the wooden sword over the hedge…and thus into her own backyard.

Kuroyama Hinoki was surprised by this.

I felt the same way.

Had the Class Rep not watched any TV the day before? Or had she been so focused on the contestants that she hadn’t seen me as the second?

Whatever the case, I was glad. That reduced the risk of her getting involved.

Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid gave me a glance through her

sunglasses.

…She was asking if we should continue discussing this here.

I shook my head.

No, we should not.

“Oh, honestly…”

The Class Rep puffed out her white cheeks at being left out. She seemed more upset that she did not understand what that eye contact had meant than that we were discussing something in secret.

“Stupid Satori-kun. Oh, just you watch!! I’ll train even harder and learn some secret technique that lets me kick even an Archenemy’s butt!!”

I really didn’t like the sound of that, but she stormed off.

“The scary part is she could probably find a way. What do I do now? If she shaves off one of her eyebrows, puts on a ratty sleeveless dogi, and says she’s going training in the mountains, I don’t think I can stop her.”

I muttered to myself as I watched her leave, but the bipedal mermaid giggled while hiding her identity with the Three Sacred Treasures of the hat, mask, and sunglasses.

“What’s wrong with having such a cute friend?”

“Maybe if it was all wasted effort, but you can’t let your guard down with her because she really will climb the ranks of whatever martial art she works at. She takes everything she does way to seriously.”

I finally turned my smartphone back on and sighed as I connected to Maxwell.

But Kuroyama Hinoki still acted like she had seen something bright.

“She’s still cute. …Oh, I get it. She’s training her body because she’s afraid of having *people like us* take you away from her. In that case, maybe I shouldn’t have intruded on your fun.”

“?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant, but did Archenemies think being attacked by a wooden sword was “fun”? Their sensibilities were a bit of a mystery.

I pushed my collapsible bike with both hands as I started down the road again.

“What do you need today? You’ve been freed from the Colosseum, haven’t you?”

“Remember what I said? I want to pay you back.”

I forgot to climb onto the bike’s seat.

I fell silent and we stared at each other for a while.

“…Even if that means moving back toward the Bright Cross?”

“…”

“If not, then just leave. If so, then you’re treating this too lightly and it kind of pisses me off. Listen, it wasn’t me that risked my life. It was Itou Helen. She literally bet her life on rescuing a complete stranger, so your debt is to her. So are you really going to waste the life she gave you? Think carefully about this. How would you feel if your situations were reversed? …Did you really get all the way here

without realizing you deserve to be punched for this?”

“…That’s exactly why I want to do this.”

Kuroyama Hinoki also placed her hands on the bike’s handlebars.

She seemed to be telling me she would not let me continue on.

“If our situations had been reversed, I have no idea if I would have been able to give so much thought to my opponent. In fact, when I was fighting, I was only focused on surviving. It wasn’t about what I could or couldn’t do. I never even considered anything else. So I think I understand how noble the witch’s…Itou Helen’s answer was. That was a fantasy I never even considered, but she made it a reality.”

“…”

“The witch in the Little Mermaid was cruel, but to the very end, the mermaid must have been thankful of the witch who made her dream come true. I’m the same. And since she made a supposedly impossible dream come true, I can’t just ignore that. I can’t let her die while I live happily ever after up on land.”

Kuroyama Hinoki stared right at me through her sunglasses.

She was not looking away.

“If you want to punch me, then punch away. If that’s the rite of passage needed to save that witch, I’ll go through with it. Now, what do I have to do to be a part of your group?”

“…Fine.”

I mussed up my bangs with a hand and sighed.

“I appreciate your help. But you only get to work in the

background. It's Itou Helen and me that will actually take on the Bright Cross. …You've already 'retired', so no matter what happens, you can't return to those death matches. Make sure you understand that."

"Understood. …You really are a worrier. But that might be what's drawn so many Archenemies to you. We tend to be tough, so no matter how reckless we get, people rarely worry for us like they do other people."

We exchanged a handshake.

Her hand was cold, like I was holding a fish caught on a hook.

"This might be sudden, but…since you're in a school uniform, I take it you're continuing with the normal cycle of school life?"

"Sorry. I know it really isn't the time."

"It's fine and I understand. If you let unusual circumstances drag you around, you can grow accustomed to them and you let them win. …But you do understand that we don't know when Itou-san's next match begins, right?"

Of course I understood that.

We had safely won the 1st match. But no one could guarantee how the next one would go. In fact, it was set up so the danger would increase with each consecutive match. Just like the odds in Russian roulette.

It was just like a prisoner on death row who wasn't told when his execution was scheduled. Today might have been fine, but what about tomorrow? What about a week from now? When that moment of ruin could be coming at any time, they could never relax.

That was why I…no, *we* had to stop this.

Even if we opened a hole in the wall and dragged Itou Helen out, they could send out a bunch of hounds and take her back. So we had to stop this on a more fundamental level: the entire execution system.

“Even if we’re fighting the Bright Cross, it’s all for nothing if Itou-san is taken out on the way.”

Kuroyama Hinoki nodded at the determination in my eyes.

“So even if it only extends the time limit for the time being, I think it’s important to gather as much information as we can: who her next opponent is, what kind of Archenemy they are, and what their traits are.”

“Come to think of it, we had a lot of trouble yesterday because we didn’t have a chance to do that.”

Both with the mermaid herself and with Itou Helen’s hidden power and true desire.

If we had known everything from the beginning, things would have gone a lot differently.

“I’d also like to know about the witch’s power. What are its limits and how adaptable is it? Simply put, what can it do and how far can it go?”

We wouldn’t be able to prick the opponent with a venomous needle to fake their death every single time. But if we had a stock of other methods, we would have greater odds of rescuing the other Archenemies.

We were fighting on the stage set by the Bright Cross, so we were at an overwhelming disadvantage and trying to plot against them

was truly foolish. But having some rescue methods stored up would still influence how confident we felt.

“Understood. So will your job primarily be investigating things?”

“I’ll give you a throwaway address. You can use it as casually as a search engine. Send a request and I’ll get to gathering info.”

I also had to investigate the Bright Cross’s system and search out its weaknesses, but it would be best not to tell her that. I didn’t want to lose the life we had worked so hard to save.

Then I received a message from the smartphone stuck into the GPS navigation slot on the bike’s handlebars.

“No. I, Maxwell, am the user’s information gathering agent, so that will not be necessary.”

“Hey, what is this? Is someone watching us from somewhere?”

The disguised mermaid looked around nervously.

“No, just think of it like an AI on the phone.”

“Hm? An electric Archenemy? Is it like a gremlin?”

Kuroyama Hinoki did not quite seem to get it.

“But old books are much more useful than the internet when it comes to finding information on Archenemies. That’s better than putting your life in the hands of some random online encyclopedia, right? I know a lot about the libraries and used bookstores around here, so I’m perfect for the job.”

“…”

“Maxwell, don’t send back an ellipsis as a message. If you have

something to say, just come out and say it.”

“Sure. Since I have your approval, I will follow the policy given to me. Boo 凸(´Д`) ”

“Maxwell, I don’t know what happened, but don’t flip off a girl.”

“It’s fine. Oh, I know. I can show you around to the best library and used bookstore. There’s no point in hiding my sources. Are you free afterschool?”

“I am. Let’s meet up after my classes let out.”

With that, we parted ways.

Every little bit helped.

I was glad to know there were others who wanted to help Itou Helen.

Part 3

I pedaled my collapsible bike to school and found most everyone discussing yesterday's incident.

Namely, the live broadcast of the Level 4 Archenemy disposal system.

The Colosseum reborn as glamorous show business.

"That was so cool. Itou's that girl in the 1st year, right? That was her national debut. If I got a photo with her, I could get so many likes on Counstagram!"

"As her teacher, I'd noticed a while back that she had the aura of someone special. And that she's an Archenemy. Of course I'd noticed."

It was all like this.

From the underclassmen to the upperclassmen, everyone who loved gossip was discussing it like it was no more than the latest fad. Even the adult teachers were in on it.

This was what happened once she appeared on TV? It was like a clear line between those filled with anger and the targets of that anger. Couldn't they tell they were talking about a normal girl who had studied at the same school as them until yesterday and who could smile or feel heartbroken from even the slightest comment!?

I couldn't hide my anger, but I had something to take care of. I walked to Itou Helen's underclassmen classroom.

I couldn’t actually meet with her.

I didn’t even know where she was.

But I was allowed to hold a video chat with her over my smartphone for a short predetermined amount of time every day.

“Um, I want you to make sure Pi-chan the parrot is okay.”

The witch on the screen really had been worried about that. Even more than herself despite being stuffed inside a birdcage. That reminded me she was the one that looked after the animals.

“Pi-chan is surprisingly sensitive and, um, he sometimes learns weird words when I’m not looking…”

I didn’t intend to stay in the underclassmen area for long.

I only had to check to see who would give the parrot food and water while Itou Helen was gone. That was all.

But that casual feeling was blown to pieces the instant I peeked through the classroom door.

“Hah hah! This is the zombie parrot from that video, right!? Wow, it’s so creepy. Its wounds really do heal. That’s creepy as hell!!”

Something was there.

It was a large boy. His cellphone’s flash was going off as he aimed it toward the birdcage by the window as he got worked up all on his own.

“Wow. Why isn’t this thing dead? Is it one of those birds that can come back from the dead? I bet this’ll make me famous. Talk about a scoop!! I’ve gotta get a close up! A real close up!! Ah hah hah!”

An odd smell came from the classroom.

The bird's food was splattered around the area and it gave off an unpleasant smell when mixed with the water.

An unrestrained male voice, bright flashes of light, and an awful mix of bird food and water.

This wasn't someone to worry about too much.

And so I didn't worry at all about the idiot's human rights.

"Maxwell."

"No. This will accomplish nothing. Saving the parrot will not change Itou Helen's situation. And the opponent has a larger build than you. Age-wise, he is probably your upperclassman. Do you want conflict?"

"I don't care about that. …Help me here. That's an order."

"Sure."

The members of this class were not particularly protecting Itou Helen. They simply looked unsure how to deal with the sudden intrusion from an upperclassman.

So I would show them how to deal with idiots like this.

"Wow, I didn't know it was possible to be that ugly. If you actually understand human language, then turn this way."

"Ah?"

From the sound of it, the idiot couldn't speak human language after all. The instant he turned around, I set off my smartphone's flash right in front of his face.

After blinding him, I bent back and slammed a full-power headbutt right into the forehead of that ape who hadn't quite reached the level of humanity.

I was impressed by the nice crack of the impact.

With our foreheads pressed together, I made a superb suggestion.

"Let's take this outside, scum. I'll make sure you can never walk down the hallway with your head up again."

I didn't wait for him to answer.

I used both hands to shove him right out the 2nd story window.

Part 4

I was sure I would be suspended and had even planned to use the extra free time to focus on our research, but I got off surprisingly lightly. The school's teachers may not have wanted to hurt the school's brand by leaving any paper records of the incident.

After a lecture that amounted to a slap on the wrist, I left the guidance room and found the forehead glasses Class Rep waiting for me in the hallway. She had her hands on her hips and held the parrot's birdcage.

"Honestly, just because you can't win in a straight fight is no reason to shove them out a window the second you meet them."

"He would've beaten me to a pulp if I hadn't."

"Meaning?"

I silently held out my smartphone's screen.

It showed a close up of someone's ugly and swollen face.

"Sigh…"

Despite her exasperated sigh, the Class Rep smiled.

I was hardly an expert at getting into fights.

Turning things around against someone bigger than you only happened in manga. Size was absolute, which was why most martial arts were divided out into weight classes. But if your opponent's mind had gone blank from fear and confusion, you could almost unilaterally kick them around. That was all this was.

Maxwell gave some additional information.

“Sure. He was apparently Okada Mitsuru of General Division Year 3 Class 2. His user name on the school’s unofficial site seems to be trying to recruit people to help him gang up on the underclassman that pissed him off, but it has worked against him. He is being flamed most severely. Of course, announcing a cowardly attempt at revenge after getting called out on tormenting a small animal and then getting beaten up by an underclassman was bound to make him a laughing stock. …Incidentally, his posts on the unofficial site were anonymously reported to every university in the country, so this will negatively affect his attempts at furthering his education. Take that 凸(`^´) ”

“What you two are doing is honestly pretty terrible, but you always take the shortest and optimal course, so it’s impossible to keep up.” The Class Rep sighed again. “I should really be scolding you here, but I can’t bring myself to do it when I see this.”

The two of us walked through the school that was quiet now that classes had begun.

“What do we do about the parrot?”

“I’ll take care of it,” said the Class Rep. “They didn’t seem to know what to do with it in the 1st year classroom and they seemed afraid of having to deal with something like this morning, so I’ll look after it at my house.”

“You don’t have to go that far. I can raise a small bird at my house.”

“I’m afraid it would learn some unfortunate words if you took care of it.”

…Is she still holding a grudge over that swimsuit dance file set? Stop giving me that look, Class Rep!!

“Hey, Satori-kun.”

“Yeah?”

“…Are you okay?”

The Class Rep asked me that.

She had arrived at school before me, so she had to have heard everyone talking about the Colosseum. Even if she didn’t know how much I was involved, it had to be hurting her heart to know that Archenemies were being made to fight for some ugly show business.

And since I had a vampire older sister and a zombie little sister, she may have thought I had picked a fight with that upperclassman because I was so furious about it all.

And that may not have been entirely wrong.

Even if I was saving the parrot, had shoving him out the window and jumping down after him been the only way? Really?

She may have had a clearer picture of me than I did.

I smiled a little and answered.

“I’m fine. If things get really bad, I’ll discuss it with you.”

“I see.”

She did not ask anything more.

The way she moved in and pulled back to maintain the perfect distance may have been something only a childhood friend could pull off.

It may have been interrupted by some recreation, but the classes themselves were running like normal. There had not actually been an announcement about the fight, so those who didn't know about it seemed to just think I was late.

In other words, the teachers wanted to avoid any trouble.

Good or evil. They were not going to judge my actions either way. Turning me into a hero or a target of bullying were both negative outcomes in their minds.

It was a lot like how the classes were running like normal even though one of their students had been abducted.

It was said you could see a wider world once you grew up, but that apparently did not apply to everyone. Some of the teachers were actively talking and laughing about the Colosseum to get the students to listen.

Part of that had to do with not knowing it was a real fight to the death. Even if the host talked of cardiac arrest or retrieving the body, they would assume it was all just an act.

But I still ground my back teeth together.

I wished all the adults like that would just die. Even after another decade passed, I would never become someone who used other people's misfortune to my advantage.

And as I felt a squeezing in my stomach, my smartphone vibrated in my pocket.

Was it Maxwell or the address Kuroyama Hinoki had given me?

Both guesses were wrong.

The small video chat screen was taken up by *her*.

“Ha ha ha! I’m everyone’s lover and your partner on lonely nights!! Please feel free to use this video of the embodiment of coquettishness, Bunny Girl Karen-chan!!”

…!?

I stood my world history book up to hide my smartphone just like someone sneaking their lunch early.

“?”

In the next desk over, the Class Rep gave me a puzzled look as she copied the text on the blackboard into her notes, but I couldn’t explain this one. She was already erupting with anger from the swimsuit dance file set and now I was having a video chat with a hot woman in a bunny costume during class!? That misunderstanding would never go away!

So I was forced to whisper my end of the conversation.

“(Why are you here!?)”

“Is that any way to greet me? I’m your contact on the management side and you’re Itou Helen’s second, making you the contact on that side. We need to try to get along.”

“…”

“I will provide you some information on your next opponent. You don’t want to go into this blind, do you?”

“(What proof do I have that data is real?)”

After all, this was the Bright Cross we were talking about. They were about as far as you could get from playing fair and sportsmanship. It would be strange not to be suspicious.

“Nooot to worry. You have my word on this one. I won’t lie about information on your opponents. Oh, I know. How about this? If I break my promise, you can do whatever you want with my sexy body for 3 days and 3 nights.”

“Bff!? …Cough, cough.”

I spat out the contents of my mouth, gathering the attention of everyone in the classroom. The Class Rep was so suspicious she was pushing on the side of her glasses. I was afraid of being told to go stand out in the hall, so I coughed to disguise what had happened.

The blue bunny girl on the screen used her arms to squeeze her breasts together and accentuate her cleavage while she opened her eyes wide.

…*She’s making fun of me! Dammit, I at least need to keep a mental snapshot of this for later!!*

“Ah ha ha! But, but! I’m not joking. We want all of the combatants to make the Colosseum as exciting as possible. We want death matches that will get the blood pumping and we want both sides to be in a dead heat! So we’ll give you all the information you need for that to happen.”

“(How can you laugh about all this?)”

I knew it was hopeless, but I asked a question that seemed to question her sanity.

“(You know Archenemies laugh and cry just like we do, don’t you? These aren’t just rumors; you’ve seen it for yourself, haven’t you? Then how can you do something so evil?)”

It made no sense.

Could someone raise their fist against Erika or Ayumi after seeing

them? Even if you'd been taught that Archenemies aren't human, could you really wield violence against girls like that when one was standing right in front of you?

I couldn't.

There was no way I could.

No matter what I'd been taught or indoctrinated with, I would always end up thinking about how much it would hurt them and how sad it would make them. It didn't matter how powerful a weapon they held and it didn't matter if I could pose any kind of a threat to an Archenemy. I couldn't believe that anyone could so readily choose to attack those girls.

Your hostility would normally shrivel up, wouldn't it?

You'd break at some point, wouldn't you?

Wasn't it exhausting to maintain all that malice?

Or was there something wrong with me? No, it couldn't be that. What I was feeling was what you called "normal" and "ordinary". Not wanting to make someone cry and preferring a smile over tears wasn't anything special.

And yet that blue bunny girl was still smiling.

That smile seemed somehow frozen in place.

"Well, you see…"

"…?"

"What would you say if I said I was a monster who was once forced to leave the straight and narrow because of my belief in the infection sources we call Archenemies?"

I gasped.

Her voice made me feel like a rusty knife had been stabbed into the center of my chest.

“Just kidding! Ah ha ha! You should really seal away that kindness that makes you believe anything someone tells you. Otherwise you won’t survive the Colosseum which is crawling with literal monsters.”

The dried atmosphere was blown away in an instant.

What was that?

Had she been telling the truth? Or was it a bluff meant to get me to sympathize with her?

“You want to know about Itou Helen’s next opponent more than about me, don’t you?”

“(…If you want to tell me, then tell me. I won’t believe you, though.)”

“Ah ha ha! Suit yourself, you damn tsundere. You’re so cute. Now, then. Time for the announcement. Who will be Itou Helen’s next opponent!? Zazan!!”

She even made her own sound effects.

…It was a real shame that someone so hot had to be an enemy.

“Her opponent in Round 2 will be a fairy named Hanesaki Minori! Make sure she gives it her best shot.”

…*What?*

A fairy?

“(Wait a minute. What do you mean!?)”

“Ehh? I mean a fairy like the ones in children’s picture books. They’re a pretty major Archenemy, but are you really not familiar with them?”

It was true that fairies were as well-known as vampires and zombies. It was even said the victims abducted by fairies would lose their humanity and become fairies, so they fit the conditions for being an Archenemy.

But even so…

“(That’s way too broad. It’s barely a hint! That could mean anything from a palm-sized pixie to a non-humanoid unicorn!)”

“Of course it does. This is the problem with you silly millennials. If I gave you all the answers from the beginning, it wouldn’t be a very exciting match, now would it? Don’t forget that we can choose what information we give and what information we don’t for our own benefit. Besides, some data on Itou Helen will be going to the fairy’s side as well. You’d be pretty mad if we told them all of her weaknesses, wouldn’t you?”

“(…!?)”

That was a good point.

And it confirmed that the witch data was going to the other side. But how much? Not knowing that was another source of concern.

“Of course, an Archenemy that’s already fought can have its weaknesses researched and revealed from the recorded footage. The disadvantage of fighting consecutive battles is more than just an issue of stamina. Ah ha ha!”

Dammit.

This woman really does understand our Achilles' heel!!

I worked to stay cool and forced my seething mind to draw out as much information as I could.

"(When does the next match begin?)"

"Non non. Telling you that wouldn't be any fun. Not knowing what tomorrow holds is part of being a death row prisoner. Otherwise executions would be the same for someone who killed a single person and someone who killed 10 people, and how would that be fair? Ah ha ha! From the look on your face, you must be feeling the pressure in your stomach, so that's good!!"

"…"

"I'll tell you one thing. The next stage will not be at Kukyou 1st Broadcasting." The blue bunny girl seemed to be mocking me. "Our information and impression manipulation more than gets the job done, but there are some people with unshakeable hearts like you. Just to be safe, we aren't going to stay in one place."

That meant I did not know where Itou Helen was being imprisoned.

But that also meant the Bright Cross was afraid. They weren't an absolute barrier. If they screwed up, they could lose or be destroyed. She had told me that herself.

Yes.

Just like when they had detected me and Maxwell and quickly left that vast subterranean facility.

"Now, where exactly might we have moved? Feel free to make some guesses, but we'll definitely surprise you. Ah ha ha! That's all from the official PR mascot, Bunny Girl Karen-chan☆"

Part 5

Our next opponent was a fairy.

Her name was Hanesaki Minori.

I hated acting based on information from that bunny girl, but that was all I had at the moment. I made a mental note to seriously make her pay up with that hot body if she was lying.

“3 days and 3 nights, bunny costume included!! Just to be sure, I need to stop by the drug store and buy some condoms!! I wonder if energy drinks really help with that!”

“User, please tell me what exactly it is these preparations are for.”

As I left school with new determination in my chest, Maxwell asked me an oddly cold question.

I stuck the smartphone in the collapsible bike’s GPS holder and set it to speakerphone.

“Maxwell, check for any personal information on Hanesaki Minori.”

“Sure. She did indeed go missing about a week ago. Her family submitted a search request. It was treated as a normal case, so she was assumed to have voluntarily run away from home and no real search was performed.”

I climbed onto the bike seat and pressed my weight on the pedals to move forward.

“Any traces of the Bright Cross intervening?”

“Sure. A detective from the life safety division of the Kukyou Police was working on the case of his own volition, but he suddenly stopped. There is no data suggesting why, but…”

“Pressure from the higher ups, huh? Dammit, that’s only supposed to happen in dramas.”

I didn’t trust the bunny girl named Karen, but it was true that Hanesaki Minori sounded likely.

Assuming they weren’t so monstrous that they would make a completely unrelated person “disappear” just to bait me.

Maxwell found a photo of Hanesaki Minori on the worldwide SNS named Counstagram. She looked like a plain indoorsy glasses girl with two unrefined braids. The glasses were the same, but she was a different type of glasses from the determined and unrelenting Class Rep. She seemed to be a fairy Archenemy, but she was human-sized and did not have wings growing from her back or a single horn growing from an equine face.

To be blunt, there was nothing there to suggest what kind of fairy she was. In fact, she looked so normal I wasn’t confident she was even an Archenemy.

…It was possible she had the hardest time believing that herself.

“Sorry about the wait.”

After arriving at the meeting spot, a voice eventually called out to me.

It was the surprisingly curvy girl with her long, long black hair forced inside a hat and her identity hidden by sunglasses and a mask like an idol trying to sneak around.

It was the mermaid Archenemy named Kuroyama Hinoki.

“I didn’t think I was that late, but were you waiting long? You seem on edge.”

“No, you’re fine. Sorry.”

I obediently bowed while still sitting on my bike.

“As I explained in the email, our next opponent is a girl named Hanesaki Minori. She seems to be a fairy Archenemy, but the details are unknown. That could be anything from a palm-sized pixie to a non-humanoid unicorn. Please help me. We need to split up and investigate this. If we can’t figure this out, it’s hopeless.”

“Fine by me. As long as this can repay you two and help that girl survive.”

That settled it.

But no matter what I said, there was not much I could do. Texts on Archenemies were often more difficult to find for a cutting-edge machine like Maxwell. We had somehow managed with the mermaid, but if you gathered all the information on the internet about vampires and zombies, 80% of it would be data on video games and horror movies and the remaining 20% would be from dubious sources. It wasn’t uncommon to find a site that looked nicely academic, but to later find that the administrator’s bible was an RPG guide.

That meant leaving all this to Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid. She had said she would show me an analog library or used book store that was good for Archenemy information.

We rode the collapsible bike together. The soft mounds pressing against my back caused my heartrate to needlessly increase as she guided me to the shopping district.

This is…urp.

Mixing reality with virtual reality was not a good idea, but we were near where I had beaten up that toy poodle zombie in the simulation.

But…

"…?"

"Surprised, aren't you? Walk just a bit into the shade and there's a used bookstore."

As Kuroyama Hinoki had said, we walked into a narrow alley that most people did not walk down. We were a long way off from the imported goods supermarket with plenty of strange spices and tea leaves that (most importantly to Erika) was open late into the night or the lingerie shop where Ayumi would buy some insane underwear when she wanted to force herself to look more adult.

I had heard on some quiz show or something that used bookstores tended to place their entrances where the setting sun could not get in because direct sunlight was bad for books, but it seemed like everything would get damp if you took it this far.

I stopped the bike and Kuroyama Hinoki spoke as she got down.

"Yes, this is the place. The Bizarre Shop. This is the best place to find out about Archenemies, so keep it in mind."

She opened the door which did not fit its frame properly and entered the small half-tilted shop.

After placing a chain lock on my bike, I hurried after her so as not to be left behind.

Then my smartphone vibrated.

I checked the screen to see the following message:

“Warning: The signal is weak. I will likely be unable to provide full support from here on.”

“What? Are you upset because I said I couldn’t investigate this with a search engine?”

“…”

Again, don’t bother sending an ellipsis message.

I sighed and entered the used bookstore that seemed left behind by the modern age.

It was even smaller than it looked from the outside.

It really was crammed full of bookcases and I had to turn sideways to get through the aisles. There were also several heavy-looking cardboard boxes on the floor and on top of the bookcases and they were all stuffed full of books.

I did not see a single cheap light novel or manga volume that I felt comfortable touching. Everything was bound in leather. A lot of them made me wonder if they used papyrus or parchment instead of actual paper made from pulp. In addition to Japanese, I saw English, German, Chinese, and some in a language I didn’t recognize. Was it Latin? Or maybe a Scandinavian or Eastern European language?

“Welcome. Sorry about all the dust.”

Instead of a proper register, there was only a calculator and a small drawer. The tiny old lady sitting there looked like she had been born to fit in such a small shop.

And…

“H-hey, how much do these books cost? They all look like they must have markups for their rarity and would probably cost you all your New Year’s money. We have to gather information, but I’m in high school. There’s only so much I can do.”

“Heh heh. The internet is generally free and can’t be beat.”

Shut up, Maxwell.

Why do you sound so happy that your master is in trouble?

But Kuroyama Hinoki readily smiled.

“We’re free to read them here, so that won’t be a problem.”

“…Read these?”

I hesitantly looked to the bookcases.

You aren’t supposed to judge a book by its cover, but I was reluctant to touch these old books with leather binding, gold lettering, and parchment pages. This wasn’t just about tearing a page. I was afraid I’d get in trouble for getting the oil from my fingers on them.

Yes.

They seemed more like antiques or museum exhibits than mere books.

But the mermaid girl readily pulled a book from a shelf. She easily flipped through a book thicker than a phonebook that was protected by the kind of thin oil paper that covered the surface of a castella.

“It would be weird to insist people buy a book costing tens of thousands of yen without touching it first. That would just be

asking for people to come back with complaints after buying it. It's like a car dealership. The prices are so high that they have to offer a lot more before you make a deal. That isn't always readily obvious when that stubborn old man is running the shop though," she added. "More importantly, you want to investigate fairies, right? This Hanesaki Minori girl looks just like a normal human, so she's probably a species that has a human appearance or one that can transform into a human. You can see all the different species in this fairy encyclopedia, so isn't there any way to narrow it down further than that?"

"Hmm…"

The problem was that I knew nothing at all about Hanesaki Minori.

Anyway…

"Well, if we don't have enough information, we'll just have to find some. For now, I'll finish showing you around. Remember where the Bizarre Shop is. Let's get to the next place."

"The next place?"

The mermaid girl winked through her sunglasses.

"The library."

Part 6

She had said it was a library with a lot of Archenemy information, so I was imagining goat-horned demon statues on either side of the entrance, magic circles drawn in blood covering the floor, or a building located in a gap between dimensions.

But I was way off.

“Wait, wait, wait. This is the normal city library! I go here to study before tests!! Or when that idiot Ayumi came crying to me about her summer homework!”

It was like asking about a really good hole-in-the-wall restaurant and being taken to the nearest gyudon shop. Sure, it tasted good, but it wasn’t what I wanted!!

But Kuroyama Hinoki confidently pushed out her (surprisingly large) chest.

…Even though the place felt like a gyudon shop?

Was there a secret code word like ordering the gyudon “soupy with extra green onions”? I skeptically followed the mermaid.

“It is a normal library, but did you know there’s a donated books section in the back? In other words, they have a bookcase full of the old books normal citizens have donated them.”

I didn’t really understand.

It wasn’t some hard-to-find location. It was sitting there right between two perfectly normal bookcases.

It was chaos.

It wasn't just about Archenemies. There were books about the secret of Loch Ness, about the warriors of Atlantis who had crossed time and space, about the truth of Nostradamus, about the face on Mars, and about anything really. It would be hard to divide the fact from fiction on this bookcase.

"We seem to have a lot of people with odd interests living here. Or maybe they moved here to be closer to real Archenemies."

Kuroyama Hinoki smiled bitterly as she introduced it all to me.

"Anyway, we are thankful. The type of knowledge is a little biased, but it's useful. What is a mermaid and what can one do? This is where I learned all that."

Oh, right.

It wasn't just the fairy. If we looked more deeply into witches, we could find more that Itou Helen could do.

She had essentially been thrown into a fighting game tournament without even reading the instruction manual. She had managed to button-mash her way into a special attack, but there was no guarantee there. It was a lot like not knowing what the different colored gauges and numbers meant. And she did not have time to figure it all out through trial and error. Failure and defeat meant execution.

"I'm sure there are also experts on biology and folklore at the university and research institutes, but the Bizarre Shop and the city library are the two primary places you can use without some kind of connection."

"I imagine so."

I probably had less of a chance of knowing a folklorist than I did an idol. I couldn't even imagine what they were paid to do.

"User, please tell me what your plans are."

"If we're going to find out what Hanesaki Minori's traits are, we need to know what kind of fairy she is. Maxwell, we only have her name and a photo. How much can you find with that?"

"Sure. As much as you need."

Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid shrugged.

"Then are we just waiting for the results?"

"Of course not. The next match could be tomorrow…or even today. There's no time to waste. Let's work ahead. We need to make a list of all fairy species that look just like humans or can transform into one. Figuring out which one she is can wait. Once we learn some things about Hanesaki Minori – like if she doesn't eat food at night or is afraid of water – we should naturally find our answer."

Part 7

The rest was a battle with text.

I honestly felt like I was wasting time at school. Cutting that out of my life might have been logical, but it felt like it would mean accepting this abnormality. And that would let it win. It was apparently important to me that I did not lose sight of my humanity like the Bright Cross had done.

We used the Bizarre Shop and the normal city library.

As soon as school let out, I rode my bike over and lost myself in the books until just before my curfew. Once home, I pinned notes up on a corkboard, connected related items with string, and recorded any ideas I had in a notebook. I couldn't meet up with Kuroyama Hinoki everywhere I went. As long as we could share our information via email, we could continue our research uninterrupted. That had become our implicit understanding.

"The Silky, a white maid that protects the home like a Zashiki Warashi. The Tylwyth Teg that kidnaps only blonde children. The Gruagach that appears soaking wet at your door on rainy days to test your kindness. …There are an awful lot of fairies that look just like humans."

And all of them were beautiful women or girls. A lot of them had stories about marrying or having children with them but then having them vanish if you broke some rules.

"All fairies are weak to…iron? To make sure a mischievous fairy doesn't enter your house, you just have to hang a U-shaped horseshoe over your front entrance. Is that like silver weapons for

Erika?”

The tricky part was how these occult books often included what the compiler hoped was true alongside the simple facts. For example, that most every Western monster was weakened by holding a cross out toward it. …Including with the monsters that had existed in BCE times and thus before the cross had any special meaning. If it was that simple, I doubted anyone would still be so afraid of them that all the different species had their own names. If they could all be easily defeated with the exact same method, they would all be summed up with terms like “ghost” or “monster”.

So was “fairies and iron” a case like that?

It would be best not to just assume that kind of all-purpose method worked.

“We call them all fairies, but they all seem to have different origins. Some were a species like that from the beginning, some are the forgotten gods of ancient religions, and some are humans who became fairies…”

The used bookstore and the library weren’t our only information sources.

When at home, I did not hesitate to ask Erika and Ayumi. They really didn’t like letting me have anything to do with the Bright Cross, but they still answered my questions.

“The Colosseum format has changed a lot, but if the underlying theory is the same, there’s one unwritten rule: the Five Battles Precipice.”

“As you can probably imagine, that means that any Archenemy fighting 5 consecutive battles in the Colosseum will die somewhere along the line and will never reach the 6th battle. The two of us are

exceptions, so we were feared as statistical demons.”

In other words, that was the limit.

That would explain why the blue bunny girl had been giving me so many hints. To them, it didn’t matter which side won. As long as it was an intense battle where both sides were badly injured, the following Archenemies would go right for that wound.

I had simply been delighted at getting past the 1st battle, but the grim reaper’s clock was ticking. There was no getting off now that the ride had begun, so I could not let Itou Helen reach the solid wall of that 5th match. That mean we only had the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th matches to work with. And each of them was a true fight to the death that would wear down her life.

If they had matches 4 days in a row, that meant we were out of time on the 4th day.

That gave us at least half a week.

Could we really stop the Colosseum? Could we really crush the Bright Cross? I was far from confident. But I had to do it. At the very least, there was no hope at all if I gave up.

“Sure. I have gathered a certain level of information on the fairy named Hanesaki Minori, so I have compiled a report. Hanesaki Minori is registered with Private Elixir Girls High School. Her academic and athletic records are average. She does not stand out in her class and her name occurs in the blog and SNS posts of the other students below the average rate. This is only based on my analysis of those posts, but she seems to be known as a girl with many love affairs and there are suspicions that she has been in relationships with other students and even teachers at the school. They were all genius girls with a promising future or elite female teachers, but it is all far too gossipy to say anything for certain.

Whether it is true or not, I can only say that girls schools have their own issues.”

Elixir. That meant she attended the high school division of Ayumi’s middle school.

And not standing out seemed at odds with all the rumors about relationships. I couldn’t imagine how people talked about someone like that.

I must have been staring at the smartphone screen for too long because my vision wavered sometimes. It felt like an invisible hand was grabbing at my brain.

I took some short breaks to hold that at bay, but I wanted to use all the time I had to keep working.

When I met Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid at the library, she was still wearing the hat, sunglasses, and mask set. That seemed to make her stand out more, but it may have been like Ayumi’s scent ritual. If it helped her relax, I couldn’t exactly take it away from her.

She spread out a college notebook filled with pen and highlighter and explained.

“If you’re going to use the witch to her fullest, you should probably have her use the potions on the fairy as well as herself. A powdered potion can be thrown at her in a small bag and an ointment can be thrown at her in a small bottle. You could use a tranquilizer gun for an injection type, but who knows if they’d let her bring one of those in with her. If she can make an antidote or vaccine for herself, she could also fill the entire bug cage with gas. Maybe she could also rub the potion on a blade? Whatever the case, this looks really adaptable. It can be long-, middle-, or close-range and she can attack a single enemy or the entire area around her. Show Itou Helen this notebook and have her see what she can actually do.

Even if she thinks she can't do something, she might make a breakthrough with one of our ideas."

I was also able to speak with Itou Helen.

Not directly, of course. Just like with the blue bunny girl, I had no idea where she was. Once a day, I was allowed a short smartphone video chat at a predetermined time.

But that was better than nothing.

It let me get our results to her and she could prepare before the fight began.

"Boo. All you do is talk about Kuroyama Hinoki. Oh, I'm doing fine. My body feels kind of heavy, but I'm probably just too nervous to sleep well."

We had worn ourselves down physically and mentally, but we had worked together to gather a lot of information.

And we used that to sort through everything.

We had a college notebook containing a list of every fairy in that occult fairy encyclopedia that was identical to a human or could transform into one.

And we compared that with the information Maxwell had gathered about Hanesaki Minori.

We didn't need to find the answer right away.

She was indistinguishable from a normal human at first glance. It had likely been a surprise for her when she was taken away to the Colosseum. She might have been more shocked than anyone.

So.

She was not a Baobhan Sith that looked like a blood-sucking beautiful woman but had hooves.

She was not a Skogsnufra that looked like a beautiful woman and seduced men but had what looked like a large tree hole on her back.

She was clearly not a headless Dullahan, a palm-sized Pixie, or a single-horned Unicorn.

“Human, female, goes unnoticed, lots of love affairs, prefers geniuses and elites…”

I divided up the information we had as much as possible and kept trying to search by hand.

It felt like carving down a large rock to find the speck of diamond hidden inside.

I had started with several dozen candidates, but I soon found myself with only 2 or 3.

The sense of accomplishment was accompanied by exhaustion bearing down on my body. I just about curled up and fell asleep right there.

But I had to give the answer first.

Yes.

I had found the answer!

“The Leanan Sídhe. Isn’t this it? She possesses people by falling in love with them and she’s beautiful but can only be seen by the person she’s possessing. And in exchange for providing her lover with great talent and inspiration, she absorbs their life force and lifespan…until they…die…!?”

My head was spinning.

Why hadn't I noticed it until now? Had I really arrived at this truth with *only* my own ability? Who had given me the inspiration I used to get this far? It had all gone too well. The used bookstore, the library, all the information on Archenemies. It was all too convenient.

And this exhaustion.

Our next opponent was a Leanan Sídhe.

In exchange for great inspiration, that Archenemy robbed her lover of their life force and lifespan, leading to an early death.

Then what if the weight bearing down on our bodies – yes, most likely on Itou Helen's too while she was trapped somewhere else – was more than just the exhaustion of all those late nights?

The air-conditioned library was silent. In that vast space which felt as dead and cold as a sarcophagus in some ancient ruins, I belatedly looked over at my partner.

A hat, sunglasses, and a mask.

That girl was unnaturally hiding her identity and she smiled thinly at me from across the table.

"Kh…!"

With enough force to kick over the table between us, I practically collapsed forward as I grabbed at Kuroyama Hinoki.

No.

No!?

I heard a rustling sound.

The hat and some large mass slipped away. It should have been enough black hair to wrap all around her body. I had thought it was all shoved inside the hat, but that was wrong.

It all came away.

It was a wig. Which meant…

“So you figured it out.”

The girl stepped back as I collapsed weakly to the floor.

The hat and wig had fallen away and she removed the sunglasses and mask herself.

That revealed someone who looked nothing like Kuroyama Hinoki.

She giggled as she tied up her short brown hair with a hair tie. It wasn’t as much as Ayumi. Her hair seemed to emerge from two candy wrapper bows on either side of her head.

“A Leanan Sídhe…? But I doubt Hanesaki Minori is free to walk around outside…”

“Are you sure you want me to give you the answer? Each piece of inspiration I give you will only weaken you further.”

Dammit…!

If it wasn’t actually her, it must have been a friend or family member. She didn’t talk like she was her either. Was she the Archenemy’s second just like me? Even so, I couldn’t believe she had started a fight outside the ring and before the gong sounded just so she could ensure a win.

My smartphone had fallen to the floor along with the college notebook and the writing implements, but it started vibrating with the worst possible timing.

“Pin pon pin pooon! It’s been a few days, so did you miss me? I was so very, very lonely I thought I would die! Now, then. We’re all set up, so come on down to the special stage marked on the attached map. It’s time for the Colosseum’s 2nd round: Itou Helen the Witch vs. Hanesaki Minori the Fairy! Let’s all work together to make this the most exciting match of the century!!”

The blue…bunny girl!?

“Wait! You…you can’t do this… We’re not…ready at all…!”

“Hanyanya?”

The bunny girl shook her bright blue hair and made a show of tilting her head.

“Then is the Five Battles Precipice going to bare its fangs here?”

Dammit.

There was no point in expecting them to play fair. The Bright Cross didn’t care who won. They only had to throw the Archenemies into the cage and have them fight to the death to safely and efficiently reduce their numbers.

The second girl stood boldly over me while I lay collapsed on the floor.

“We both care about our friend, so is this any time to be holding back?”

“…”

“And looking after your combatant’s health is an important part of a second’s job. You failed to do so. Of course, if you accept this advice, you’ll just weaken her further. Ah ha ha ha!!”

How far did this labyrinth reach?

This girl had given me a lot of data. About the enemy fairy and about witches.

And the more I used that, the more of our life force and lifespan would be taken from us.

She had cut us off. Like filling in security holes.

By exposing their own identity and weaknesses, they had prevented us from attacking them!?

“I look forward to tonight.”

She cast aside the sunglasses and mask used for her disguise.

She turned her back on me.

She calmly walked toward the exit.

Without turning back, she raised a hand and spoke with scorn in her voice.

“Curse your own lack of planning and lack of power as you watch yourself lose everything. This just shows that the witch wasn’t really all that important to you.”

[Search Engine] Girl Running to the Special Stage [Absolute NOAH]

That girl was always shy and easily influenced.

Since she was little, she was often teased by the dumb boys.

After entering middle school, she had forced herself to go the same school as me, but I think that was partially because it was a girl's school.

But that didn't really solve anything.

She has to change herself for it to matter.

I have to wonder if my presence is keeping her from growing. I wonder that all the time. I'm trying to protect her, but maybe I'm placing a lid over her head.

Of course, I wanted her to work toward changing herself. I did everything I could to help. She didn't seem to dislike it and she learned a lot from me: academically, athletically, and socially. There are a number of parameters you can judge people by, but I really don't think I outdo her. In half of them or more, she's already in position to use me as a stepping stone to reach the next stage up.

And yet she doesn't do it.

She won't do it.

Almost like a kitten that enjoys being in cramped spaces, she seems to like hiding behind my back. There doesn't seem to be any way of changing that and I was aware this relationship isn't normal.

No.

I had always generally known she was different from other people.

That's become a lot more obvious of late, but even before it came to the surface and couldn't be hidden, there had been a strange sense to her like a celebrity had left the TV screen and was walking in front of me.

She lived in a different world.

Normally, she might have moved away from me and I never would have seen her again. But if she's always going to rely on me in the very, very end…

"Wait for me, Minori. I'll save you!!"

Chapter 4

Part 1

It was beginning.

This 2nd round would pit two Archenemies against each other and throw two girls, who cried and laughed just like the rest of us, into a sea of blood just because they “weren’t human”.

“Ghhh…!”

I clenched my teeth and dragged my body along which felt so heavy it was like carrying a soaking wet blanket on my back. I propped myself up on the building walls and somehow managed to walk through the nighttime city. I left the collapsible bicycle back at the city library because I doubted I could pedal hard enough to pick up any speed.

…I was an idiot.

Itou Helen was probably experiencing a similar exhaustion. And it would have grown in her each time I spoke to her and gave her inspiration from the Leanan Sídhe’s second. And she would actually be betting her life tonight.

I felt like I would pass out just watching from a seat on the sidelines, but she would have to challenge the Colosseum where even an instantaneous mistake could be fatal.

What was I doing?

Far from supporting her, I had actually tripped her up and stabbed her in the back.

“…Pant, pant!”

“Warning: your health check values have passed the acceptable limits. User, I strongly recommend you visit a medical institution immediately.”

“I don’t…have time for that…”

I was only the second, so the Colosseum would begin whether I was there or not. The Bright Cross was trying to reduce the number of Archenemies by having them cannibalize each other. As long as Itou Helen and Hanesaki Minori fought, they wouldn’t care about anything else.

I had no idea what I could do after screwing up so badly.

But I couldn’t leave Itou Helen all alone. I couldn’t let it end with me causing her trouble.

I needed a chance to make up for it.

And if that meant wearing away at my life, so be it.

So.

“…”

I finally arrived in front of the building containing the special stage. It was not Kukyou 1st Broadcasting. The Bright Cross changed their base for each battle to avoid interference.

I was in the central financial sector of the business district which was full of bright lights at night. An ultra-high rise resort hotel stood 50-stories tall in the nicest area. It was the largest lodging facility in the area and it was meant to capitalize on the sightseeing potential of the scenic ocean and mountains surrounding the city.

It was named the Kukyou Vacation Gate Hotel.

The roundabout out front was illuminated by soft lights and it was full of taxis, hired vehicles, and even long, white limousines.

Now that the Bright Cross had lost their underground base, I had wondered how they had attacked the Archenemies, how and to where they had transported them, and how they kept them confined.

“There are a number of ways.”

Back when I was still being led around by the Leanan Sídhe’s second disguised as Kuroyama Hinoki, I had asked my sisters about it.

“Even without the underground tunnels, they can create a system that keeps anyone from ‘seeing’ or ‘witnessing’ them even as they abduct people in broad daylight. For example, Satori-kun, what about a large tour bus?”

“A bus? Sure, they’re big, but would covering the windows with curtains really be enough? I mean, they’re abducting people.”

“No, Onii-chan. The entire bottom half of a tour bus is luggage space. That lets them drive around the roads with the Archenemies still in large metal cages. And if they cram a bunch of their soldiers into the top half while disguised as tourists, they can kill 2 birds with 1 stone.”

“Although given an Archenemy’s strength, they can’t just throw them down there and forget about them. But if they stuff the target in a duralumin suitcase, freeze the inside with liquid nitrogen, and line the tour bus’s cargo space with thermoses kept at -195 degrees, don’t you think they could safely transport them without any resistance?”

It was not that those girls had devilish minds. Erika and Ayumi knew this because they had been on the receiving end of it.

“If they’re using tour buses, they’ll have set up their base terminal somewhere where frequent bus visits won’t seem suspicious. That means a tourist spot like a temple or shrine. Or they could go the other way and choose a large hotel.”

“Hotels are general corporations, but they have strong ties to the executive and justice systems. They always have a hotline to the police to see if any escaped criminals are checking in using a fake name or if sketchy deals are being made in camera-less guest rooms. And if politicians often throw parties there with public funds, they’ll have a connection as well. …And that makes a hotel the perfect place for someone like the Bright Cross to be working behind the scenes.”

“And the top floors can also be used to confine any Archenemies that can’t fly. Just like a princess in a tower.”

That was this luxury hotel.

It was an unbelievably fancy and glitzy execution prison.

As I looked up at the building, a large bus full of tourists passed by. It was sucked into the roundabout and spat out a great variety of exhausted people. A bus tour guide holding a tiny flag cheerfully took role.

The hotel’s doormen loaded the suitcases onto hand-pushed wagons.

And those heavy-looking suitcases seemed big enough to hold a human if they were curled up.

Were there people in there or not?

I slowly sighed, focused on recovering my strength as much as possible, and spoke.

“Let’s get to the battlefield. Maxwell, support me.”

“Sure.”

I stayed focused to ensure my wavering vision did not entirely cut out and somehow managed to step onto the front roundabout. The doormen smiled, placed a hand on the glass automatic door to open it, and welcomed me in.

“Welcome. Will you be checking in?”

“…No, I’m here for the event.”

I was soaked with a cold sweat.

Their smiles remained.

Inside, I found a spacious front lobby and a coffee lounge filled with calming music and indirect lighting.

As I looked around, a call reached my smartphone.

“Hi, hiii! It’s Karen-chan. Please head to the staff-only door to the left instead of the general elevator. There’s a VIP elevator there in addition to the staff elevator.”

“…”

Was she watching me from somewhere?

No, did the Bright Cross have full authority over the hotel, including its security cameras? Instead of replacing a hotel room’s door with a solid steel one, it was more like they were letting the Archenemies stay in an empty room at a prison.

I spoke quietly while obeying the instructions for the time being.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure. Gathering and analyzing information concerning Kukyou 1st Broadcasting and this hotel. Checking for sources of funding and visitors in common between the two facilities. If this goes well, I can determine what groups and people are working behind the scenes.”

“Take care of it.”

There was no guarantee we could catch them that easily, but we had to try every option available.

I stepped through the staff-only door.

Very unlike the lobby, I found a cold hallway with white walls lit by pale mercury lamps. After walking a bit, I found the elevator in question.

A worker in a black suit smiled and spoke to me.

However, his smile had an invisible pressure behind it.

“Do you need something, sir?”

My cellphone provided the answer.

The blue bunny girl’s voice whispered to me.

“Is the academic forum this way? I heard I could see a rare blue butterfly specimen.”

That seemed to be the password.

When I repeated it verbatim, the muscular worker’s pressure

receded.

He pressed the elevator button.

“Oh, you were invited to that party. My apologies.”

That party.

What other secret “parties” were being held?

The elevator door opened to reveal it had its own elevator girl. The general elevators out front had to run more than 100 times as much, but I doubted they had one.

I stepped in, the door closed, and the elevator girl pressed a button without asking for my destination.

I could barely feel it begin to move and instead suddenly found myself surrounded by a gentle sensation of acceleration. Perhaps because there were no stops along the way, there was no floor counter. All I could do was stand there and lean back into the opposite corner from the control panel where the elevator girl stood.

…How much could I honestly do?

My life force had been sapped by the Leanan Sídhe and Itou Helen’s likely had been as well. If the damage to her was the same, she would be so weak that a light shove would cause her to collapse.

I could not let it go any further.

It could pass simply weakening her and actually kill her. No, it didn’t even have to go that far. If she passed out in the Colosseum, the enemy could attack her head or heart. There was no giving up or breaking up a match.

However, the weakening would only grow as soon as we gained specific inspiration from the Leanan Sídhe group.

That included information on the enemy, such as fairies being weak to steel or a Leanan Sídhe normally being invisible.

And it included the strategies we could use, such as throwing bags of powdered potion or bottles of ointment potion or combining a witch's potion with a tranquilizer gun.

I was fairly certain we would be fine if we didn't use those.

It wouldn't be a problem if we eliminated them.

But I couldn't help but focus on them now that I was aware of them. Was I already in the palm of the Leanan Sídhe's hand by avoiding those things? I felt horribly restricted.

I had to find something.

No matter what.

"Sorry about the wait. This is your floor: the Celestial Palace multipurpose hall."

"…Thanks."

With the elevator girl's mechanically polite words, the door to the execution ground slid open.

The blue bunny girl was there.

Her slender fingers toyed with the jewel decorations on her chest.

"Now, now. This way, witch's second."

"Why are you here?"

“If you wandered around without any guidance, you would run into the audience. And even if they aren’t Archenemies, you wouldn’t want to get caught in the middle of that crowd, would you? Plus, you’re involved in this gamble with so much money on the line, so who knows when someone will try to attack you to get an advantage. Right?”

“…”

She was clearly mocking me for letting someone do precisely that.

She cackled, grabbed my unsteady hand and began walking.

And damn. Her hand really did feel like a girl’s. It was nice and soft.

The elevator girl had called this the Celestial Palace. Other than the cloak room and powder rooms, the entire floor was probably taken up by a single party hall. It looked like a few inner walls had been set up to create spaces for staff, audience, and contestants. The hallway was narrow, but the ceiling was incredibly high up. Did this use 3 or 4 stories’ worth of space?

That would likely provide enough space for that giant transparent die or bug cage as well as the stepped spectator seating around it.

On the way, we passed some broadcast staff carrying bundles of thick cables.

“That is the dressing room for Itou Helen the Witch.”

The bunny girl let her glittering blue hair flutter behind her, dynamically wiggled her round butt back and forth, and pointed to one of the doors.

She then swept her blue manicured hand in the opposite direction.

“And that is the dressing room for Hanesaki Minori the Fairy.”

"…"

It was right there. And even if they were hastily built, they were like giant steel boxes.

There was a lot I wanted to say and I wanted to get back at them for deceiving me. But…

…It was too blatant. The defenseless proximity of the rooms felt like they *wanted* us to fight outside the cage. As long as it reduced the number of Archenemies or caused a serious wound, the Bright Cross clearly did not care.

"Don't even think about it, okay? Don't cause any trouble for us. Can you promise Karen-chan that?"

The blue bunny girl drove the point home with her wicked eyes opened wide.

When the Leanan Sídhe's second had been fooling me into thinking I was discovering the answers, had it been this obvious to everyone but me?

"Okay, okay. That's enough for now. …Really, really don't cause any trouble, okay?"

"…"

I watched the blue bunny girl wink, blow me a kiss, and leave through a staff hallway.

Then I glanced over at Hanesaki Minori the Fairy's dressing room.

I threw off the strange temptation and walked to another door: the one to Itou Helen the Witch's dressing room.

I knocked on the unnecessarily thick metal door and heard a quiet

voice from the other side.

"……"

I could not tell what she said, so I turned the knob.

"Ah, no, wait…"

I could not tell with the door muffling it, but a flustered voice reached me.

It turned out Itou Helen had been changing. She had removed the ankle-length cape of her witch's outfit, the black dress had the back unzipped, and her bright skin was visible. *Ohh, I don't see a bra strap, so does she generally not wear a bra with that thing?*

No, that wasn't what I had to focus on.

"Nn…"

My tiny underclassman was tensing her shoulders, holding her hands to her chest, and groaning as if bearing with something ticklish.

I could see something like an extremely thin film peeling away from the skin below the unzipped back.

…Was that her skin?

But she was not bleeding. In fact, it was like removing dead skin. Brand-new soft skin was visible below it.

What was that?

It was similar to a peeling sunburn, but it was somehow different.

Was she…shedding her skin?

“Please wait… I-I’ll be done soon.”

Caught off guard by my presence, Itou Helen reached around to her back. It was like she was unhooking a bra or scratching her back. Red-colored nails (which did not suit her at all) dug into her soft skin and then peeled away the rest of the thin film like it was dried glue.

“I borrowed a snake’s trait,” said the girl with wavy blonde hair and a witch hat decorated with a hawk feather. “I figured it would be bad to go into the next fight with the injuries I took from that mermaid…Kuroyama Hinoki-san. So I wondered if there was some way to heal them… A-and when I borrowed the shedding skin of a snake, it hasn’t stopped peeling away for a while now…”

Did that mean Itou Helen had been repeatedly “healing” herself all this time?

So she hadn’t just been weakened like I had?

…*Wow.*

I was honestly impressed. She was making better use of this than I had imagined. She could give herself the abilities of different plants and animals, she could transform her opponent into a beast to rob them of their freedom, and she could heal wounds in a short period of time? If this power was that versatile, she might just be on the same level as my vampire older sister or zombie little sister.

I had been left hopelessly weak while the Leanan Sídhe sucked away my life force, but Itou Helen had been shedding her skin over and over to overcome it. A snake shedding its skin was apparently used as a symbol of immortality through a cycle of regaining one’s youth, so this might actually be canceling out the invisible force being stolen from her.

In that case, she could fight.

I could barely stand, but she still had the strength to plant her feet firmly on the ground.

Why had I been prepared to give up all on my own like that?

Itou Helen might look slender and frail, but she was an Archenemy. She wasn't just taking the punishment like I was. And this meant we still had a chance of turning this around!

"…I…"

Then a quiet voice escaped my underclassman who still had the back of her black dress unzipped.

No…

"I can't take it anymore… Why am I fine when you're not? It's like I really am a monster. I can't argue against that anymore…"

She bit her lip.

She tried to hold something in.

But this "weakness" still managed to slip out like a groan.

I got depressed on my own and got excited on my own. All I could do was rejoice and worry, so I was in no place to criticize this tiny underclassman.

But couldn't I at least support Itou Helen? That was what I had decided to focus on as her second.

"Itou-san."

"?"

“Whatever the case, we don’t have time. This was entirely my mistake and I feel bad about it. In all seriousness, you can use all your power as an Archenemy to punch me once this match is over.”

I got down on one knee to put myself at her eye level and I made a gentle suggestion.

“So focus on surviving this match. Let’s leave a chance of reaching the next step. And let’s try everything we can to do that. Will you work with me on that?”

She nodded again and again.

Good. Our bond hadn’t been severed at least for the time being. As the one who had made the mistake, I had most been afraid of not being given a chance to make up for it.

Now.

What to do?

“I gave this a lot of thought.” Itou Helen was the one to speak first. “Our enemy is the Bright Cross, not the Archenemy in the cage. I don’t want to change that view. So…”

“Yes, I agree. But there’s no way to stop the Colosseum right now. So we have to stay on their rails until we’ve defeated the fairy named Hanesaki Minori. If we don’t manage that, we won’t have a chance to try anything else.”

“B-but how do we do that…?”

“Well…”

My mind shook when she asked that.

I placed a hand on the wall to just barely avoid collapsing and I took

slow, deep breaths to remain conscious.

The fairy was a Leanan Sídhe. Even that fact was an answer they guided me to. Using that information would only accelerate the weakening.

But I didn't care.

Itou Helen had a way of recovering to an extent. So that just meant I had to clench my teeth and bear with it. I took a large step forward as if placing my foot on a landmine. I set things in motion.

"There is a definite way of repelling a Leanan Sídhe. If the person made to be her lover forces the Leanan Sídhe onto another person before they die, they'll be saved. But I have my doubts we can manage that. I doubt she'll listen to us while worked up on a deadly battlefield. Besides, you wouldn't want to have someone else put in danger in your place, right?"

My blonde underclassman nodded twice.

That was apparently very important to her.

"That means our options are limited."

"?"

"We just have to look at it in reverse. The problem is that we're trying to defeat a Leanan Sídhe using the rules of a Leanan Sídhe. That creates a contradiction that we can't solve. But we have the entire species of a witch to work with, so we don't even have to step into her ring. What I mean is-…"

As I mustered what little strength I had to continue the strategy meeting with a cold sweat soaking me, the familiar voice of the blue bunny girl spoke from the speaker attached to the dressing room wall.

“Pin pon pon poooon! It’s time. Contestants and their seconds, please move to the special stage. Well, your options are to come voluntarily or be dragged there. Some experts who have grown addicted to handcuffs and cages are standing by just in case. Ah hah hah!!”

“So it’s starting.”

I slowly breathed out and glared at the speaker. Then we faced the door. Itou Helen zipped up her dress, put her cape back on, and held out her small fist, so I lightly tapped my own fist against it.

We would survive.

We would break through this somehow.

We walked down the hallway and ignored the staff who moved out of the way while staring at us with looks of pure curiosity or irresponsible pity.

The door to the Colosseum’s special stage was a double door with large brass knobs.

It reminded me of the entrance to the wedding hall when my dad married my stepmom.

With Itou Helen by my side, the men in black suits standing on either side of the door seemed to focus on their earpieces. They must have received a signal because they waited for the exact right moment and threw open the double doors.

My senses were hit by a deluge of light and noise.

“Now, now! Tonight’s one-of-a-kind entertainment has begun! The miraculous return of martial arts!! Expanded consumption, regional economic activity, and a new reason to enjoy life in your old age! The Colosseum has it all!!!!!!”

The fierce spotlights and large speakers were almost enough to crush my unsteady mind.

I wobbled on my feet, but Itou Helen supported me from the side.

How pathetic.

But I wasn't trying to look cool.

I didn't care how pathetic I looked. I would do what I could. I wasn't going to flee toward impossible ideals. If I did, I wouldn't be able to save anyone. When building a stone bridge over a canyon that would mean death to any who fell, you could not mix in some styrofoam blocks just because they looked nice.

Once my eyes adjusted to the light, the scene was so identical to the TV station that I felt déjà vu. The transparent bug cage was surrounded by stepped spectator seats. This was likely enough to gather a few thousand people to watch the deadly entertainment of the Colosseum.

The blue bunny girl stood atop the giant bug cage with mic in hand as she made her usual lip service. She would occasionally focus on her small rabbit earpiece, so she seemed to be receiving opinions from the staff.

"In this corner, we have Itou Helen the Witch who defeated the mermaid to emerge victorious in her first battle! She has signed up for a second battle to follow that. Now, will she be able to double the 10 million she won, or will she lose and pay with her life!? We will find out tonight!!"

The spotlights moved away from us.

The flood of light landed on the opposite corner of the die-like bug cage to illuminate two girls who placed a hand above their eyes as

if blocking out the sun.

The blue bunny girl introduced them.

“And in this corner, we have Hanesaki Minori the Fairy who will be challenging the witch! Hee hee. Do any of the gentlemen in the audience feel their heart pounding hearing it’s a girl’s first time? Will she be able to win the base sum of 10 million!? And is everything about money in this world!? Which one will grasp victory and a stack of cash, and which one will receive divine punishment!? Let’s find out!!”

I finally saw the Leanan Sídhe fairy.

Hanesaki Minori.

“…What is that?”

Her clothing looked like someone had cut out the important bits of a school uniform and then added a corset and a thin apron on top. It was a stage costume much like a cultural festival café uniform made from whatever was on hand. But that was not the surprising part.

At first, I thought it was because I was seeing her through the reinforced glass bug cage with the powerful spotlights shining on her from various angles. Just like a pedestrian could vanish when crossing the street in the evening due to the headlights of a car in the opposite lane.

But that was not it.

Only one of the two girls was clearly “thin”. I could see through her. I could only barely see her, just like something from a cliché ghost story.

…Or as her target, were we the only ones that could see her?

However, the spectators were excitedly focusing on her like normal. So did she appear translucent to everyone?

“Maxwell. What does she look like through the cameras?”

“Sure. Hanesaki Minori is detectable in the visible light, infrared, and ultraviolet spectra. The details are unclear, but a certain amount of light appears to be passing through her.”

It wasn’t just people. She looked the same to machines as well.

Well, at least she didn’t have the unilateral advantage of being invisible.

The Leanan Sídhe was a glasses girl with 2 shoulder-length braids. She seemed to be a different type of glasses girl to my neighbor forehead glasses Class Rep who would speak her mind to anyone: boy, girl, upperclassman, underclassman, or teacher. And she did not at all look like someone with a lot of love affairs. Her face was well-formed, but she lacked the charm of someone who was fooling around on a daily basis.

…Perhaps it was the other people who approached her. She may have been the loner type of girl who seemed shy and would probably do anything you asked if you were insistent enough. I could see how she would gather a lot of attention, even if it was not the good kind.

And.

“…”

“…”

The second girl and I glared at each other. She had been wearing a varsity jacket and pants and giving us hints while disguised as Kuroyama Hinoki the mermaid.

If asked whether I hated her or not, I would of course say I did.

But I did learn something from that crisis. I wasn't taking this seriously. No, I hadn't been taking it seriously enough. I had said I would try everything, but I had still drawn a definite line and refused to cross it. I was no different from the people who expressed their sympathies while only watching the suffering Archenemies from a safe distance.

So in a way, I respected her.

She had taken this seriously enough to cross that line and get her hands dirty. She had gone that far to save the Archenemy she cared for.

But.

Throwing out your normal life for this emergency was the same as the hunter becoming the hunted. If you threw out your "humanity" with a know-it-all look like the Bright Cross, then it was all over. She was the one that had said so much that had no direct connection to guiding me to the Leanan Sídhe's information.

"Okay, okay. Contestants and their seconds, please get in position. There is no field effect like the flooding from last time. Please stand firmly on the ground and draw out every last ounce of strength☆"

While holding the glass wand that looked like an overly complex siphon coffee maker extended vertically, the witch girl took a step toward the bug cage.

"Senpai, I'll be going…"

"Yeah, I'll give you instructions over your earpiece. If there's anything you want me to investigate, just tell me. Maxwell and I will handle it. Remember: you aren't alone."

“Right.”

Itou Helen gave me a thumb’s up and shook the bottom of her cape as she walked toward the deadly cage. She stepped in through the entrance opened by a worker. She grabbed the colorful potion bottles on a silver wagon and stuck them into her witch outfit.

“By – the – way. Itou Helen…or should I explain this to your second?”

“…?”

“The game rules have been updated. Before handing over the defeated opponent’s corpse, they will be decapitated to confirm they are dead. Oh, but you will be given both the head and the body afterwards, so don’t think too much about it, okay?”

Goddammit!!

I had known something like this was coming, but it still felt like a blow to the chest.

I grabbed my smartphone and spoke through Itou Helen’s earpiece.

“We have to assume knowing the condition will make it easier to come up with a way around it. We just have to find a way that she’ll survive even after having her head chopped off.”

I knew I was being ridiculous, but I just had to line up the conditions and find a way through their nonsense. A Leanan Sídhe could only be seen by her lover. That meant it was possible we could use an illusion or something to get her through the beheading process.

Whatever the case, we had to win.

That I could not compromise on. I had to focus on the constant risk of a single mistake leading to my underclassman’s death. And I also

had to keep in mind that Itou Helen did not want to fight other Archenemies.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find some kind of ridiculous loophole that overcomes their demonic calculations. So you focus on fighting.”

“Right. I’ll trust you, Senpai.”

Meanwhile, the situation was still underway.

Atop the giant bug cage, the blue bunny girl adjusted her grip on the thick mic with her pinky raised, swept her hair back with her other hand, and made a loud announcement.

“Then let’s get to it! Round 2 of the Colosseum where cash flies through the air! Who will win: the witch or the fairy? Tonight, we will find out!! Now ring the bell to begin the match!!!!!!”

A thick, deep buzzer rang like when a cell door opened in a prison.

And it finally began.

The horrific Colosseum began.

Part 2

Surprisingly, the first attack was made by Itou Helen, my small animal of an underclassman.

Her cape fluttered behind her as she inserted several potion bottles into her glass wand. Colorful liquid raced through the transparent tubes and gathered in the swollen flask portions. Heating, cooling, distillation, and freezing. Various chemical reactions were used to draw out a phenomenon beyond any of those chemical equations or physical laws.

A spear of ice longer than my blonde underclassman was tall swept across that space. In fact, 7 of them did. With their mass and speed, a clean hit from any one of them could smash someone to pieces and they assaulted Hanesaki Minori from every direction.

But the fairy in a school uniform modified into a bare shoulder waitress uniform did not even dodge.

She ignored it. And she walked forward. That was enough for the 7 spears to pass right through her. She had not used some strange ancient martial art. She had not dodged using superhuman leg strength.

The attacks had simply passed through her.

The spears had continued on as if only air had stood in their way.

“…That isn’t enough to damage her!”

“Sure. A Leanan Sídhe can only be seen by her lover and cannot be touched by normal people. We should have already assumed that

anything but her target would pass through her.”

“But the Leanan Sídhe shouldn’t have any way to attack. She can only sap her lover’s life force until they die, and the only way to avoid it is to turn her toward someone else. But she shouldn’t have claws that can tear through steel and she shouldn’t be able to breathe fire!”

“Sure. But with her 2 hands, she should be able to use a human level of violence. For example, ignoring all of Itou Helen’s attacks, knocking her over, and throttling her should be plenty deadly.”

“…”

“Only the Leanan Sídhe and her target can influence each other. That means Itou Helen should be able to fight back with her own hands.”

“Her? Barehanded? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

I was also an indoor type and I wasn’t exactly confident in my physical strength. And yet she seemed so slender that even I could break her if I held her too tight. I had no actual data to back it up, but I was certain that Itou Helen would be overwhelmed even if it was against another girl. She would be strangled and unable to recover.

Damn.

If any modern weapons would be neutralized because they slipped right through her, then no matter how plain she looked, was this girl an even greater Archenemy than my vampire older sister or my zombie little sister? I couldn’t see how to defeat her without any legends to rely on like a cross or holy water!!

“Kh.”

I heard a tense breath from my earpiece.

As School Festival Waitress Hanesaki Minori walked closer, Itou Helen was forced to fall back. She was quickly driven to the corner.

Instead of using my smartphone, I spoke directly to her small back which was about to hit the other side of the glass wall.

“Itou-san, how far can you go with the potions that place ferocious beasts into your body? If it’s your hands or feet, you should be able to touch her. You need to arm yourself with beasts and fight back!”

“But…”

“Don’t think about the risk of killing her! If you die, there’s no chance of saving Hanesaki Minori. She’ll just die somewhere else when the Five Battles Precipice catches up to her. If you don’t want to abandon her to this cage, then you have to fight!!”

I knew I was saying some awful things.

If she could touch the Leanan Sídhe like normal, the fairy might be no sturdier than a human girl. If Itou Helen took in the traits of a bear or lion, there was a risk of accidentally tearing her to pieces.

But I said it anyway.

I had nothing to base it on, but I believed this route would take us closest to the “best result”.

“Fight. You have to face her. If the only way to save her is to drive her to the very limit and place her in a state of apparent death, you can’t hesitate to raise your fists! If you stay on the standard rails, then Hanesaki Minori has no way of escaping certain death. You are the only one that can lower her odds of death, even if it’s only to 99% or 98%. So don’t let go and face her like you mean it!! Please, pave the way toward saving her!!”

The pure girl responded to my unfair words.

She adjusted the potion bottles in her glass wand, moved her manicured fingertips at blinding speed, and changed the color of the liquid flowing through the clear tubes.

Even through the thick reinforced glass, I could clearly hear the small girl's bones and muscles straining from within.

There may not have been much of a difference when looking *just* at her outward appearance, but the internal structure was definitely changing.

There was only one change I could actually see.

They were not quite claws.

Something like long dark needles extended from each of the fingers on Itou Helen's right hand.

"What are those? Poison stingers?"

"Sure. An image comparison shows they are quite similar to a red-banded sand wasp. Of course, the thickness and length are far greater."

A red-banded sand wasp.

Instead of gathering together to form an obvious "hive", I was fairly certain those were lone wolves. They targeted bugs in the ground, paralyzed the bugs with a prick from their long stingers, and then fed those bugs to their own larvae.

Unlike a hornet, they were not feared as deadly.

But that was only because they were tiny insects. Once the stinger was enlarged to the size of a knife, it would be able to inject far

more of its chemicals at once. That would probably be enough to paralyze an entire human and turn them into a specimen.

Just like with the jellyfish, she had chosen another venomous animal, but perhaps that was because a Circe witch was skilled with potions.

Regardless, this would allow her to fight.

It did not matter how slender she was. Her demonic right hand could stun her target with just a stroke…no, just a touch. And the Leanan Sídhe had set Itou Helen as her lover, so she would be able to touch her without any trouble. And that meant Hanesaki Minori would be helpless!

Or so I thought.

But shortly thereafter, I heard two light popping sounds.

The witch's right hand had been knocked outwards.

"…"

Even as I watched from the side, I hadn't been able to fully follow what happened.

Itou Helen herself had to be even more confused on the receiving end.

The Leanan Sídhe had pulled something from the short skirt of her school festival waitress uniform. They were two…sticks?

Were those retractable police batons!?

The docile-looking translucent girl continued to move.

The center of the small witch's chest and her lower stomach.

She accurately struck at least those 2 points. Itou Helen's small body was knocked from the floor and her back slammed into the clear wall right behind her.

"Analysis of high resolution video footage complete. User, Hanesaki Minori's movements suggest she has learned some form of martial arts. However, it does not appear to be kendo. Since it includes grabbing and foot techniques, it is most likely based on Southeast Asian staff martial art or a derivation thereof."

"How was this not in her data? Did we not know she was attending a gym or something!?"

"No. There is no history of her doing so. However…please wait. There are payment records of her second, Yuubari Setsuna, attending a kickboxing gym. If I expand the search to include foreigners who visit that gym, the variation grows to include a Southeast Asian cook and language teacher. One of them might be trained in using staffs."

"…So we just weren't searching wide enough. Damn."

The bunny girl had only given us the name of our opponent. The second had remained hidden. Their second, Yuubari Setsuna who had disguised herself as Kuroyama Hinoki, had learned this from a foreigner at the gym she visited and she had taught that to Hanesaki Minori.

And this was not something you could learn overnight. She could not have started training only after being abducted by the Bright Cross and knowing she had to fight us.

But.

"There were rumors that Hanesaki Minori had a lot of love affairs, but it's possible she was only really known for having a lot of

people approach her. So if Yuubari Setsuna was teaching her this as a means of self-defense…”

This meant Hanesaki Minori did not need to let attacks pass through her.

She had powerful technique beyond the simple potential of her species.

And with her translucent body, it was hard to grasp her exact distance while moving around so quickly.

Then I finally remembered something.

To keep things somewhat fair in the battle between Itou Helen and Kuroyama Hinoki, the witch had been given those chemicals and the mermaid had been given a bunch of water.

Then what about this time?

I seriously doubted the Bright Cross would give us those potion bottles for free. After all, more damage would be done to both sides if the battle entered an extremely-close dead heat. The Five Battles Precipice existed precisely because there was no such thing as a flawless victory.

Then had Hanesaki Minori been hiding something equal to those potion bottles?

“Wait a second! Isn’t this supposed to be a battle between Archenemies!? Can she really bring in a human weapon like a police baton!?”

“Hanyaaaan?”

The blue bunny girl tilted her head and spoke in a way that would’ve made me punch her if she wasn’t a woman.

“Um, what do you think Itou Helen’s glass wand is? Why would you think anything like fair play exists in a deadly battle between monsters?”

Goddammit!

Itou Helen was a witch. She could not fight without tools. But if they used that as an excuse, could they let our opponent bring in a handgun or a bomb!? That was like adding on an extra option on top of their power as Archenemies!

“What’s this!? Hanesaki Minori looked like a shy librarian, but was she actually a surprisingly active girl!? Is this the beginning of a counterattack by the capable girl!?”

Oh, no.

It did not matter how many wasp or scorpion stingers the witch could wield if School Festival Waitress Hanesaki Minori could strike with weapons that did not require her to directly touch her. She could swing the batons to crush the poison stingers. We could not hope she would pass out first while Itou Helen took damage.

I quickly directed a message to the girl’s earpiece using my smartphone.

“Itou-san, you can’t just increase your own power. You’re going to have to throw some potions at her to wear down her stre-…!”

The words caught in my throat.

I felt a shock like a horse had kicked me in the heart.

“Cough, cough cough!!”

This was the Leanan Sídhe’s penalty.

Damn, was even this too much? Throwing bags or bottles of potion was out of the question? And Yuubari Setsuna had said a lot of other things as well: filling the entire cage with gas as long as we had an antidote or putting a liquid potion into a tranquilizer gun.

And that sealed off those options.

We would have to get the witch's potion into Hanesaki Minori the Leanan Sídhe some other way. We did have a surefire technique, but it hurt that we had no other options. It was like being told to win 10 games of rock-paper-scissors in a row while only able to play scissors. It was theoretically possible, but it was nearly impossible in practice.

Meanwhile, the Leanan Sídhe approached Itou Helen whose back was pressed against the reinforced glass wall.

As soon as she got close, she began a fierce flurry of attacks with the twin clubs.

"Itou-san!!"

This was the perfect example of something being hard to watch.

She desperately avoided falling over and covered her face and gut with her hands, but that wasn't enough. A knee dug into her side, the intense pain and oxygen deprivation caused her hands to hover up, and the alloy clubs swung mercilessly toward her jaw and the center of her chest. It was like receiving concentrated fire from the 180 degrees in front of her so even rolling to either side to put some distance between them was difficult.

The blue bunny girl moved the thick mic to her hot lips and intentionally accelerated my impatience.

"Is it already over? Itou Helen is in dire trouble! Is she receiving

divine punishment for greedily going for double prize money!?”

Shut up, shut up.

Whatever the case, we only had one option. The only question was when to play that card.

“Wait…Senpai…”

“Itou-san!”

“Something…isn’t right.”

Of course something wasn’t right. We hadn’t expected our opponent to bring a weapon into the Colosseum and pummel her like this.

But.

That was not what Itou Helen was talking about.

“This person looks…on the verge of tears…!!”

“Ah.”

That meaningless syllable escaped my lips.

I had made a fundamental misunderstanding. I hadn’t known how to look at the trick artwork.

And I received the answer while ignoring the weight of the penalty bearing down on my body.

A Leanan Sídhe was only visible to her lover.

And in exchange for providing that lover with talent and inspiration, she stole their life force and lifespan until she killed them.

In that case…

“Why…?”

My words finally regained meaning.

“Why can we see Hanesaki Minori?”

Her second, Yuubari Setsuna, made sense. They had trusted each other from the beginning.

I could understand Itou Helen inside the bug cage as well. As the target, she would have been intentionally given mistaken love.

But what about me?

And what about the blue bunny girl and the spectators? Was her love really that indiscriminate? Or was there more to it? I should have thought about it more. If Hanesaki Minori was really a Leanan Sídhe…

Then her lover was doomed to die.

And the odds were good that lover was Yuubari Setsuna, the second who was fighting alongside her despite the risk.

The only way to escape a Leanan Sídhe’s curse was to give her another human lover.

The only way to save Yuubari Setsuna was to abandon her and move on to someone else.

That was the crux of the issue.

She had intentionally revealed her weakness in order to hide her true intention from Yuubari Setsuna. She had needed to camouflage it by saying she had a plan. Otherwise, Yuubari Setsuna

never would have obeyed her instructions.

Meaning.

Hanesaki Minori had wanted to save Yuubari Setsuna from the Leanan Sídhe's curse.

And so she had placed her trust in the wicked outer world.

She had intentionally passed her weakness to us, her opponents, and trusted that we would take care of it.

In that case…

I see. Did Hanesaki Minori want us to kill her?

With that, it all made sense.

There had been a hole in their interference. It hadn't been clear if the Leanan Sídhe's power would reach us through the second. They could have directly taken my parents hostage and had me give Itou Helen mistaken instructions during the match.

But she had concealed her true intention.

She had deceived Yuubari Setsuna to save Yuubari Setsuna.

…Was this a form of salvation gained through the Colosseum?

In her desire to protect someone she cared for, she did not lose hope in the face of this malicious world, faced it with courage, and then died as the kindest one of us all. That would save Yuubari Setsuna and allow us to overcome this awful night for a happy ending.

Was that really okay?

I couldn't let this terrible atmosphere get to me!!

"Itou-san."

I breathed in and out.

There was a lot to deal with: the Leanan Sídhe's curse, the physical battle using the alloy clubs, and the decapitation kill confirmation made by the blue bunny girl.

But I still chose to challenge this horrific situation.

"…I want to save Hanesaki Minori. There's only one way to do that. I'll handle the timing. Will you work with me?"

"Yes. What exactly do I need to do?"

"Maxwell. Hanesaki Minori's combat techniques are only human ones and they shouldn't be using any Archenemy supernatural phenomena. That means they can be simulated using nothing more than the laws of physics. How well can you analyze her movement patterns?"

"Sure. Given 60 seconds, I can do so perfectly. But a full minute is a long time in the ring."

"Itou-san, last just a minute longer however you can! Then we can see through her timing!"

The impressive blows continued.

Itou Helen's already slender body looked like it would break at any moment.

I knew this was hardly efficient.

And I knew this wasted injury would only sharpen the fangs of the

demon of statistics, leading to the absolute jinx of the Five Battles Precipice. But…

We won't abandon you.

Hanesaki Minori, you're more "human" than any of us, so we won't let anyone call you a monster.

I glanced over at the progress bar on the screen. Something was wrong with my heart, my head felt like it was going to burst, and I felt like I was going to drown in the air.

That was when I heard a horrific sound.

The fairy's club had dug into the witch's side. But something was different this time. Itou Helen was moving oddly, just like a toy doll that was slammed into the ground and had its gears knocked out of place!

"Oh, my! Was that a clean hit!? Did that take out the witch's ribs!?"

…

I clenched my teeth so hard I thought they would break.

But.

Even so.

"Task complete. I have successfully analyzed Hanesaki Minori's combat pattern based on the two clubs. User, please hold your smartphone up toward the fairy. Predictions of her future actions will be displayed using arrows."

"Itou-san!! Now!!"

I just about screamed the instruction.

Hanesaki Minori's short skirt and apron fluttered as she horizontally swung her two clubs together like a bat, but the small blonde girl's cape fluttered behind her as she ducked down below the attack.

That created the first opening.

The fairy would be killed if she lost, so this may have been the moment she had most hoped for.

They were already right in front of each other and Itou Helen moved in even closer as if forcing herself between Hanesaki Minori's arms.

They were so close that the girl could not use the full force of her blows.

But martial arts were not where our strengths lay.

Itou Helen was a potion-using witch and she specialized in poison.

"!?"

The fairy was most focused on the red-banded sand wasp stingers extending from the 5 fingers of the witch's right hand. Still holding the club, she grabbed the back of Itou Helen's hand and applied pressure. That was enough to prevent my underclassman from moving her wrist.

Hanesaki Minori did the same to the left hand, sealing off both hands.

But that did not matter. It was fine.

A moment later, Itou Helen moved in as if to headbutt Hanesaki Minori.

No, she was moving her lips in close.

“W-will that…actually work…?”

Before the match, Itou Helen had cowered down like a small animal in her black dress and asked me that question in the dressing room.

“Yes,” I had confirmed. “If the Leanan Sídhe is too frightening, we only have to remake Hanesaki Minori onto a different Archenemy. And Itou-san, if you really are a Circe witch, you should be able to do that.”

The most notable trait of Circe was the magic potion that remade humans into animals by recreating the gods’ divine punishment using human techniques.

And the girl who fell victim to Circe became the Scylla sea monster which had 3 dog heads and 12 legs and had killed 6 heroes who were recognized by the gods.

That meant it was not restricted to existing animals. Circe’s transformations would include Archenemies.

“It’s true this is essentially cheating,” I said. “Humans and Archenemies are entirely different and cannot coexist. Archenemies must be managed to prevent the risk of human infection and they must be swiftly killed and disposed of otherwise. That is the foundational principle of the Bright Cross. But Circe’s potion can fundamentally overturn that. For example…what if you could create a potion that remade an Archenemy into a human or animal?”

“Ah.”

“The Bright Cross would lose their excuse for oppressing Archenemies. And it would not eliminate the threat either. If they were permanently stuck as human, that would be one thing, but if they can freely switch back and forth with a potion, they’re no

different from a werewolf mixed into the crowd during the day. And since they truly are human while human, they can slip past any test. …That's why the Bright Cross sees you as a threat. They want to prevent the completion of Circe's potion so that doesn't happen."

And.

If Hanesaki Minori lost her traits as an Archenemy, we would be able to take advantage of all the weaknesses that were currently off limits thanks to the Leanan Sídhe's penalty. With that freedom restored, there was no way we would lose. That was our plan.

Hanesaki Minori had turned out to be plenty strong on her own, but the problem remained the same.

Giving her the witch's potion and redesigning her body would solve everything. Not only would she lose her power as a Leanan Sídhe, but if she could not even move properly, she could no longer fight at all.

So it came down to that one attack.

If we could just get in that one attack!

Part 3

Scattering a powder, rubbing an ointment on a blade, throwing a bottle of liquid, and firing a tranquilizer gun had all been sealed off.

So the problem was how to administer the potion.

And I had recalled that there was still an opening.

Yes, all of Yuubari Setsuna's ideas while disguised as Kuroyama Hinoki had used tools.

She had not touched on any ideas that used Itou Helen's body to administer the potion.

So.

"Gh…!?"

A girl groaned.

But it was not Hanesaki Minori in her school festival waitress uniform.

"Bhah!!"

It was Itou Helen. She stopped moving just before completing the kiss. I could tell Hanesaki Minori had twisted the other girl's wrists along with the clubs. The sudden pain had shocked Itou Helen and she spat out the prized potion.

Some got on the fairy's face, but the potion in our plan needed to be swallowed. Merely touching her skin would not do anything.

And then Hanesaki Minori's counterattack began.

Still holding Itou Helen's hands, her twin braids raged as she threw a fierce headbutt. My blonde underclassman staggered from the powerful blow to the head, but the small animal of a blonde girl had moved right up to her foe. The headbutt must not have felt like enough since Itou Helen was staying too close for the rush of physical blows to do real damage, so Hanesaki Minori buried her face in the neck visible through a gap in the cape.

No.

Was she biting her!?

"Khah!?"

The cry sounded like she was prying open her burned-shut throat.

And then the girl's body wobbled.

Yes.

Hanesaki Minori's body did.

Part 4

Potions came in many forms.

They could also be administered in a number of ways: a tranquilizer gun, a powder a gas, etc.

But.

“The most definite method is to create a situation in which she will put it in her own mouth.”

“?”

“Let’s inject the potion into your bloodstream. Then if you create a situation where she’ll bite you, it should get into her body.”

Part 5

The transformation began with the girl's entire body seeming to bubble up.

The mouth-to-mouth potion had not been the real one. That had been a trap meant to be stopped so she would get carried away. I mean, I wasn't about to waste a girl's lips in battle.

Hanesaki Minori the Fairy's silhouette collapsed. Her subdued and docile but attractive face fell apart. Incredibly violent dog faces jutted out and octopus or squid tentacles grew from her.

It was impossible to tell where the 2 clubs had gone. In fact, the slender hands holding them were nowhere to be seen.

She lost all traces of humanity.

She became a true monster.

As her body changed so drastically, Hanesaki Minori seemed unable to support herself. No, maybe she couldn't even breathe on her own. She became no more than a giant hunk of flesh and blood that continued to grow as it filled up the giant die-shaped bug cage.

This was Circe's potion.

That bizarre potion irreverently recreated the divine punishment of the gods using human techniques.

The entire arena fell silent.

For a brief moment, even that blasphemous blue bunny and the audience may not have known how to react.

And a few seconds later…

A dark cheer grew into a frightening rumble that shook the entire high-rise hotel.

“Dreadful! Such dreadful destructive power!! What did Itou Helen even do? At the very least, there’s no explaining this using radiation or genetic alterations! Truly a monster! Truly an Archenemy!! This is what you call a one-hit win! This shocking scene is sure to change the outcome of so many ‘worst way to die’ arguments!!”

Itou Helen looked up at the grotesque mountain while the malicious mic performance and cheers washed over her. Her back looked so very small and about ready to break.

Someone even shouted “murderer”.

It was Yuubari Setsuna who fell to her knees on the other side of the die-shaped bug cage

“…”

There was little I could do while observing this from a position of safety.

So I at least made sure not to let Itou Helen bear it alone.

I faced the blue bunny girl who was working up everyone’s excitement with mic in hand atop the bug cage.

“As promised, we’ll be taking the corpse.”

“Go right ahead! You surely have some, well, niche interests. But don’t forget that we’ll be confirming she really is dea-…”

That demon trailed off when she finally caught on.

Yes, Hanesaki Minori's current body was not human. She was a mountainous mishmash. Several giant dog heads stuck out and there was a veritable forest of octopus or squid tentacles. This was a monster one would never find in the natural world.

Meaning…

"If you want a head, choose whichever one you like and chop it off."

Even the legendary Scylla had not died just from losing one of its dog heads. Those were no more than a decoration for that monster.

So would they search that mountain for the beautiful girl's face? But would that really kill her? The only one who knew was Itou Helen who had made the potion for this redesign. It was like having an important file encrypted by a third party.

So I would challenge the Bright Cross.

I would take on that awful international organization using this chance that Itou Helen had risked her life to give me!

"Once you've taken one of the heads, we'll be taking the rest. …You can't complain about that, can you?"

[Search Engine] How the “Corpse” Was Used [Absolute NOAH]

“Minori!”

The match was over.

The boy and girl returned to their dressing room while everyone glared at them. Then Yuubari Setsuna, the second, charged in after the “corpse”.

The mountain of flesh and blood had already been stripped away, leaving only the original beautiful girl.

And more importantly, Hanesaki Minori was not translucent. She had lost the Leanan Sídhe trait that meant only her lover could see her.

“It’s okay. It’s okay now, Setsuna-chan…” said the former Leanan Sídhe who looked like she could hardly believe it herself as she pulled the thin sheet up to her chest. “I haven’t fully returned to being human *yet*, but they say they can redirect the Leanan Sídhe ability that kills her lover so it won’t have any effect. So now I don’t have to worry about killing someone I care for…”

Hearing that, Yuubari Setsuna finally realized the witch and fairy had been fighting on another dimension entirely. She had been the only one choosing to mercilessly kill in order to survive.

She quickly turned around.

But the witch and her second were no longer there. Only a cracked door.

The legends concerning fairies say that the victims taken away by fairies will lose their humanity and become a fairy themselves. But there is a way for those victims to regain their humanity.

If you see a familiar face in the fairy parade, immediately run up to them. And no matter what awful things the fairies do to you, never give up and continue to hold them in your arms.

If your courage and love are real and you do not give up to the very, very end, that person who became a fairy will be freed and return to their human life once more.

Chapter 5

Part 1

I had to watch the bright sunrise from the road outside the luxury hotel.

But I suppose seeing the sun at all was better than the alternative.

We had made it through another night.

We had won the 2nd round.

But that only meant the hands of the grim reaper's clock had advanced one more step.

The Five Battles Precipice. The demon of statistics.

We only had the 3rd and 4th rounds left to work on this. We had to find something to destroy the nationally broadcast Colosseum and drive out the Bright Cross before the fated 5th round began.

Perhaps due to shaking off the Leanan Sídhe's curse, I felt full of energy. But that did not cheer me up.

…What would I do about Itou Helen?

I knew she could heal her wounds and recover her lost stamina to an extent by shedding her skin like a snake. But she might have broken her ribs this time. Could she heal something as bad as broken bones just by shedding her skin?

This accumulation was what created the merciless rules.

I had to do better. The Five Battles Precipice did not mean we were safe until the 5th round. It meant she would die in the 5th round *or*

earlier. So she could have easily been killed back there.

So I had to hurry it up.

I had to find a way to save Itou Helen.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“Did you find anything in common between the 1st round’s TV station and the 2nd round’s luxury hotel?”

“A few. First, the broadcast equipment and staff used for the 2nd round were the same as at Kukyou 1st Broadcasting. And that obviously includes the bunny girl. Also, both facilities are part of the same economic cooperation organization. That organization appears to gather the opinions of the financial world and pass them onto the political world, but it is no more than a decoration started by a specific politician. In other words, it is no more than a briefing that eliminates any opinions deemed inconvenient to Kukyou City’s elites.”

“I’m not entirely sure what that means, but are you saying they’re guilty?”

“Incredibly so. This is a textbook example of corruption.”

…If they were that bad, then I was in danger just having that information, but that ship had sailed long ago. There was no chance of safety from the moment I had chosen to oppose the Bright Cross.

“Also, this information is not certain, but I think I will provide one warning as a simulator.”

“?”

“I am a handmade disaster environment simulator that you constructed singlehandedly, but I take pride in my processing power’s lack of inferiority. …And yet you have run across too many unexpected situations lately. I can only call this odd.”

“…You say that, but isn’t that just because we don’t have enough data to build a proper simulation of the abnormal Bright Cross? That’s why your calculations aren’t perfect.”

“I am saying not even that can explain it anymore. For one thing, the very beginning of this incident was odd. On the very day we had decided to head underground and destroy the Bright Cross, they had already withdrawn from that facility and started this public Colosseum. Why? Doesn’t the timing seem a little too perfect?”

“…Are you saying they predicted our actions?”

“Sure.”

“Maxwell, is it possible you’re being hit by a cyber attack? Have you been checking the size of the data transfers?”

“You cannot trust the answer from a possibly infected system, but I can find no trace of an attack. I am monitoring all packets, but I cannot find a single byte outside of the requests from myself or from you. You can review all of the results if you wish.”

Maxwell’s simulation data was set up to be sent to the college and research institutes that assisted in his construction…and the Bright Cross had influence there. But I supposedly had an additional program in there fooling the system when it chose that path. At this point, I doubted I had just made a simple programming error. The syntax was simple enough and, if there was a mistake, Maxwell would have sent a flagged warning during the testing in a virtual space.

But wait.

What if…?

“…Isn’t this really bad, Maxwell?”

“Sure. If there is no issue with my specs and no sign of data being stolen in a cyber attack, then only an extremely serious possibility remains.”

In other words, the Bright Cross was doing the same thing.

Just like us, they were running simulations with a largescale processing device to detect when disaster would befall them and to construct a countermeasure to stay ahead of it. That was why we were not doing any damage to them.

Or to put it more simply…

“It is possible the Bright Cross has a simulator much like myself. And I can estimate that they have gone a step beyond us and given it greater specs than my own.”

“You’re…kidding…”

“No. I have not been given such flexible conversational ability. Everything I say is serious.”

I felt a chill in my stomach instead of my spine.

That possibility was far too devastating. A normal human – and only a high school boy at that – had only been able to get this far thanks to my unfair reliance on Maxwell.

If they had a computer more powerful than Maxwell, I would lose that advantage.

And while Maxwell was my masterpiece, we were only talking about a handmade machine limited to a container in size. There was nothing I could do if they brought out a nationally-funded supercomputer larger than a gym!

But if that was the case, then I was back to being nothing more than a high school boy. It was like being thrown into the back alleys full of guns and Archenemies with no weapon to speak of.

And it did make sense.

Kukyou City was a regional city where the disaster prevention business was booming, so a lot of effort went into developing supercomputers and simulators. The Bright Cross was a group that fought the Archenemies that they called disasters. If their tendrils really did stretch to every part of the city, it would be odd if they *didn't* use those handy supercomputers.

Also, what was the Five Battles Precipice again?

How had they calculated out and built up the theory of that demon of statistics? They couldn't exactly work it out in their heads, so they would use a supercomputer or simulator.

"User, this is a double-edged sword."

As a program, Maxwell did not feel despair. Even if he knew he was inferior, he would suggest the optimal solution to the current situation.

"The Bright Cross's simulator is indeed the greatest threat at the moment, but it is also their Achilles' heel. If we can locate it and attack it, the Bright Cross will lose their eyes and ears. If their simulations stop, my proposed strategies should have an effect once more."

Perhaps so.

But where was the Bright Cross's unseen computer?

To reiterate, Kukyou City was a disaster prevention city that worked at developing disaster countermeasures. With the university, corporations, and research institutes, there were plenty of supercomputers or simulators for them to use. It was also possible that the actual computer was located on the other side of the planet and they were only connected by a high-speed line.

What a pain.

This was like searching for buried treasure in a minefield. The words "safety" and "certainty" just kept slipping further and further away.

Part 2

“Pin pon pon poooon! Huh? You don’t look too happy. Did something happen?”

I arrived back home shortly after 5 AM.

That was more than 2 hours before when I usually woke up. I wanted to get what little sleep I could, but could I really just flip a switch and fall asleep? And a video chat arrived before I could find out.

I had no idea how much she knew, but the blue bunny girl was acting as naively as ever.

“Look, look. It’s everyone’s idol, Karen-chan. Do I need to lean forward and squeeze my tits together to emphasize the cleavage? Okay, look heeeeere☆”

…Of course I still looked.

I mean, I might as well. I wasn’t serious about it, but why should I reject what’s offered to me? That would be immature. Okay, fine. I’ll admit it!! Just how perfectly had she simulated the creature known as Amatsu Satori!? It was scary!! (Stare, stare)

“What do you want…?”

“Don’t say that after staring so intently at me like that. Oh, or are you more of an ass man? Did you know you have to tug at a bunny costume to keep it from riding up in your butt?”

…I wanted her to just get on with it, but if I complained, would she

show me more?

“Tah dah! It’s time to announce today’s subject: your opponent for the 3rd round.”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

I had to stop her there.

This was no time to be staring at that jewel-adorned cleavage!

“We only just finished the previous match! You’re already putting together the next one!?”

“Hanyanya? Did we ever mention a rule about a set number of days between matches?”

Kh…

Since Itou Helen was learning to use her power as a witch, were they trying to end this before she could grow any further? Or was this all progressing according to the scenario calculated out by the Bright Cross’s simulator?

Either way, this was bad news for Itou Helen who might have damaged her bones. She would finally have to fight with her previous injuries intact.

The Five Battles Precipice.

The demon of statistic was clearly beginning to bare its fangs during this 3rd round.

The blue bunny girl winked, gave a glimpse of her canine teeth, and put on a perfect smile.

“Your opponent in the 3rd round will be the brown-skinned

Muramatsu Yukie! And what's this!? It says here she's a dark elf!!"

…

What? A dark elf?

"Wait, are you sure about that? …That's a legit Archenemy and not just an RPG species? This is feeling even more fantasy-oriented and otherworldly than vampires or zombies. Archenemies can go that far?"

"Now, now, Mr. Second. All Archenemies are fictional beings. We can't allow even one of those to exist in the real world, now can we?"

"Kh."

I thought the pressure of her smile was going to make me drop the smartphone.

I knew trying to figure out how the insane Bright Cross thought was a hopeless task. But what was with their hatred!?

"Anyway, that's everything I needed to tell you. As before, we give both sides only as much information on the other side as we can without getting in the way. …Although Itou Helen has fought two rounds now, so the recorded footage will provide a lot of data. Hee hee. Like the way she screamed from the hit to the ribs below her cute chest."

"You…!!"

"I haven't done anything. And I won't tell them any of that. Then again, this is a serious battle with your lives on the line. They would have to be pretty stupid if they didn't go over that footage countless times and ultimately notice it. I expect they'll aim for her side to see how she reacts. Ah hah hah!!"

She ended the video chat.

…Yes, this went beyond direct injuries and exhaustion. A lot of information about Itou Helen was known now. The first-time fighters had all of their information hidden, so our disadvantage would only continue to grow.

Was this also a part of the Five Battles Precipice?

If so…

"…I need to work extra hard."

It was up to me to make up for our handicaps and difference in information.

This time…

Yes, this time I truly had to support her as her second.

Part 3

I would do the detailed research afterschool. I planned to use the city library and used bookstore that had come in handy (or that had harmed me?) when researching Hanesaki Minori the Fairy, but the time in school passed painfully slow. The hands of the clock barely seemed to move at all. I wanted school to end as soon as possible, but the boring classes refused to free me.

I visited the school library during lunch, but that may have mostly been a way of reducing the pressure and tension inside my chest instead of a way of actually accomplishing anything.

The library accepted requests and donations from students, so it had more than just encyclopedias and medical texts. It had probably started with someone bringing in a stuffy hardcover novel that had won some award or another. There was no manga, but there were plenty of fairly light-looking novels on the shelves.

Our next opponent was a dark elf.

…To be honest, it did not feel real at all. Vampires and zombies might not seem realistic either, but this felt like another level entirely. It felt like something you could never see while on earth. If you wanted to see a dark elf, wouldn’t you need to create a magic gate and travel to another world?

I felt shocked it was even possible to meet one.

I grabbed the books from the shelves that seemed related, but the only ones that actually used the term dark elf were the light novels with manga-style illustrations.

But.

The reason this felt so surreal may have had to do with their high “quality” as an Archenemy. They seemed more unrealistic and more otherworldly. Simply put, they felt like another step toward being a monster beyond a vampire like Erika or a zombie like Ayumi.

“Satori-kun, what are you doing in here with such a grim look on your face? …Hm? Searching for a novel???”

The Class Rep suddenly appeared.

Her uniform looked so impeccable I had to wonder if she had it dry cleaned every day.

“It’s rare for a digital human like you to come here. But that one isn’t very good. It says in big letters that it’s getting an anime adaptation, but I don’t have much interest in those late night shows.”

And growing harsh when it came to books may just have been the way of literary girls.

…Late night anime was not a bad companion for late night work. Y’know, like how housewives watched the midday dramas while ironing the laundry.

When carefully soldering circuit boards or wiring up large machinery, doesn’t your mind just seem to boil if there isn’t any background noise? Or is that just me? I kind of want to hear that I’m not the only one working at that hour.

“Do you read that kind of thing, Class Rep?”

“I read anything that looks like a book.”

Wow. That was worse than I thought.

I could guess she was like the vice principal: ask her for a recommendation and the list will never end.

“What are you looking for, Satori-kun?”

“Well, a book with an elf in it. No, wait. I guess it has to be a dark elf.”

“…I feel like you’re entering a deeply sinful zone here, Satori-kun.”

She sounded exasperated, but she still grabbed a few light novels from the shelves and handed them to me.

Again, this was surprising. I hadn’t expected that straitlaced Class Rep to be into fantasy. …Or did this mean they weren’t as light as they might appear?

“You need to thank the vice principal.”

“?”

“He’s apparently a strictly literary kind of person, so he sponsored this library. He even lamented that he had wanted to be the advisor for the literary club or theatre club. He apparently donated his own books.”

…Huh? Did that mean this Our Princess Went Delinquent and Became a Dark Elf 2 or this As a Master Strategist, I’m Unmatched in this Fantasy World 17 belonged to the vice principal? And the titles were pretty long for how silly they were!

“Come to think of it, Class Rep, could you tell me what a dark elf is?”

“That depends on what definition of elf you’re using,” she

immediately answered. “The human-sized elves from Norse mythology and the palm-sized elves from England are completely different things. Although the English ones are more commonly referred to as fairies these days.”

We had fought a fairy in the 2nd round.

In that case, I doubted that was it.

“Let’s start with the Norse ones.”

“Norse elves look just like humans. It isn’t clear if they actually have pointed ears, but all the texts agree that they are beautiful. Now, there are actually two kinds of elves: the Ljósálfar and the Dökkálfar. Their names simply mean Light Elves and Dark Elves. Fits the fantasy image perfectly, doesn’t it?”

“How are they different?”

“Who knows. The Dökkálfar are said to have dark skin and wicked hearts, but that’s mostly just for the convenience of the stories. The only differences that are known for sure are the skin colors and where they live.”

“Then what do elves as a whole do? Like, do they wield swords or spears?”

The Leanan Sídhe had used two clubs.

Itou Helen’s glass wand could be used as an excuse to have us fight an Archenemy with a weapon. A master swordfighter would be enough of a threat.

But the Class Rep shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

“Hm?”

“Stories tend to have them swinging around swords or firing bows, but I don’t think anyone can tell you what their sword is made from, how it’s made, or what shape it’s made in. The same goes for how elf sword fighting is different from the human equivalent. All we know is they probably move similar to a human since their bodies are so similar.”

…This was too broad. This opened up the possibility of an expert in the Yagyu Shinkage-ryu. It was useless unless we could narrow it down further.

“Then is there nothing only an elf can do?”

“Hmm…”

The Class Rep thought for a bit and then stopped moving.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What?”

“Or rather, elves just seem like pretty people who live in the forest. Fantasy stories tend to depict them as skilled in magic or archery, but it never seems like something a human couldn’t do if they trained hard enough.”

If they were exactly the same as humans apart from their long lifespans, it was true an expert sword or spear user would be frightening, but *if that was all,* a Yagyu Shinkage-ryu elf would not be all that hopeless an opponent. They would be a threat, but Itou Helen would be able to handle it with all her control over supernatural phenomena.

Which left one other thing to ask about:

“You mentioned something about England earlier. What can their elves do?”

“I don’t recommend mixing knowledge on the two.” The Class Rep smiled bitterly. “But in that case, it would be elflock and elfshot.”

“What?”

Even video game magic was more creatively named than that.

It sounded lot more like English than the Ljós-whatever and Dökk-whatever, so I could see that this was from England.

“Elflock is a prank in which they tangle up or tie up someone’s hair or a horse’s mane.”

“…That sounds useless at first, but it’s probably a real pain to deal with.”

“When a rope gets all tangled up like bird’s nest, that’s elflock.”

So like tangled wires?

In that case, my house may have been infested with invisible elves.

“And elfshot is a sudden, intense pain that people feel. It has a number of effects. It can cut the skin like a Kamaitachi, it can paralyze the body, or you can suddenly find a bruise out of nowhere. I think it’s supposed to be a wound from an invisible flint arrow or an invisible fire iron.”

“…Hm?”

She sounded so casual, but there it was.

An attack from an invisible arrow or fire iron could indeed be deadly.

“But it’s not the most credible idea. In Germany, they apparently refer to a trick back as a witch’s attack, so this might just be a slang term.”

I see.

If it really was just a saying, it might have nothing to do with the actual creature. They say to let sleeping dogs lie and to not cast pearls before swine, but there was no point in taking those seriously and using them to come up with a countermeasure for the wild beast.

“…By the way, Class Rep, you know an awful lot about this kind of thing.”

“(…Only because I studied up to get along better with your family.)”

Part 4

School was finally out.

There were 2 things I had to investigate.

The first was of course Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf, our opponent in the 3rd round.

And the second was the Bright Cross that ran the Colosseum. Specifically, I had to look into the possibility of a simulator with higher specs than Maxwell.

…They were both important, but it seemed to me the simulator was the bigger deal. As long as it existed, I felt like any of our planes would be predicted and crushed in advance. And if its specs really were greater than Maxwell's, there was a risk they could force their way through his defenses using the brute force of their machine power.

To put it another way, things would be much easier as long as we could crush that mysterious simulator in advance.

"User, what shall we do?"

"…I want to narrow down the conditions first. Is their simulator in the city or outside it? Let's start with that."

This would be a lot simpler if it was outside the city.

At first glance, having the actual computer on the other side of the planet sounded worse, but this was Kukyou City. It was a scenic location surrounded by the ocean and the mountains, but it had

been used as a penal colony long ago and it could be easily isolated if a few bridges and tunnels were blocked. That was why it had been chosen for experimentation on and possible disposal of Archenemies.

And the internet lines were no different.

No matter where in the world the enemy supercomputer was, there were only so many thick lines connecting to the outside world. If I cut those lines, the Bright Cross could no longer receive data from the simulator. Its support would be over and that would be that.

I of course had to worry about satellite and wireless connections, but I could cut those off with a few extra steps.

If the alternative was sneaking into a strictly-guarded facility and blowing up a supercomputer larger than a gym, heading into the empty mountains with some wire cutters was far easier.

Conversely, this would be a lot trickier if the simulator was inside the city. There were only so many thick lines out of the city, but the thin lines and weak WLAN connections spread across the city like a spider web. In that case, a cut line or two could easily be bypassed. I wouldn't be able to stop it without destroying the supercomputer itself.

"Then to start with…"

"Yeah," I readily agreed. "Let's cut all the thick lines out of the city and see what they do."

Part 5

When I returned home, my little sister Ayumi was upset.

“You’re late, Onii-chan! If you were going to be late for dinner, you should’ve sent an email. I was starving sitting there in front of the food waiting.”

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Also, Onee-chan is using the microwave to reheat the cabbage rolls she made, but she’s smiling and really pissed, so you should just bow down to her. Any terrible excuses would just add fuel to the fire.”

“Seriously? Today was her day to cook!?”

She looked like a queen, but she was actually a big sister who truly cared about her family. The whole family did not gather often since she was nocturnal, so she liked to make the most of that time.

And when I responded to her cabbage rolls with a satisfactory prostration, she sighed and used her regretful legs to gently step on my head. She wore the same uniform, but she was entirely different from the Class Rep. Talk about an oppressive aura!!

…And unlike in the long skirt of her gothic lolita dress, the nocturnal school uniform gave me a perfect view of her 120% adult panties, but I of course left that unsaid. *Kh, they’re blood red! But Ayumi said any terrible excuses would just add fuel to the fire!*

Eventually, we all ate together.

For my nocturnal vampire older sister, this would be like breakfast.

“But why your special cabbage rolls? Is this some kind of anniversary?”

“…Oh, the internet is acting up and I couldn’t view any of the recipe sites, so I thought I would make the cabbage rolls since I know how to make them by heart.”

My older sister would puff out her cheeks if I fiddled with my smartphone during dinner, so I took a short break. Her dream was to be a lovely wife, so she happily grabbed the serving spoon when I asked for seconds.

After offering to do the dishes, I moved to the sink, grabbed a sponge, and spoke to the smartphone I had set on the stainless steel countertop.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“What happened with the test viruses you sent to the TV station and the luxury hotel?”

“I sent 49 types of harmless malware to the stages for the first two rounds via 159 different routes, but not one was successful. I believe the Bright Cross’s data is being protected with precision surpassing my own. An engineer working by hand could not intercept them at this speed.”

“Which means…”

“Sure. Even with the thick lines out of the city cut, the simulator is still in effect. The simulator itself is likely somewhere inside the city.”

"…"

What a pain.

That was the Bright Cross for you. They sent everything in the worst possible direction and refused to make anything easy for me.

"Maxwell. If the Bright Cross has a supercomputer somewhere in the city, could it be at a public agency?"

"No. A public agency's supercomputer is classified as a public works tool, so they are constantly monitored by citizen's groups and ombudsmen and the project as a whole must be made public. That does not suit the needs of illegal calculations like the Bright Cross's."

"So they aren't borrowing a supercomputer at a national university or research institute."

"They could be using a general corporation, a private university, or an unregistered device such as myself. Owning a supercomputer is not restricted by law."

There was the Electric Utility Law and other related laws, though.

Hm.

"What does a supercomputer-level machine need?"

"Sure. This will include a wide range of topics. First, the machine itself has a lot of mass, so it would break through the floor of a normal apartment. It cannot be powered with a normal residential power source and it would also need a cooling system on the level of a cold-storage warehouse. It needs an environment with clean air void of dust and dirt, all static electricity must be eliminated, lightning strikes and power surges must be guarded against, and shaking and tilting are also off limits. And in addition to shaking and

impacts from outside, there must also be a countermeasure against the noise and vibration of the machine itself. After all, dozens if not hundreds of large computers will be hooked up in parallel, so dust could pile up quite high and they could even produce a resonance based on their natural frequency. Also, to receive and transmit so much data, they must inform the ISP or have their data capped. Even if you only built a container-sized handmade machine, wouldn't you know all this better than me?"

"It's like your own smell. You don't notice it yourself."

In that case, I had to start by searching for a location that fit those conditions.

Once I had a list of suspicious supercomputers, I would begin another cyber attack against the facilities connected to the Bright Cross. The machine that sent and received a bunch of data at that moment would be the Bright Cross supercomputer being used for defense.

"What should I do about the thick lines out of the city?" asked Maxwell.

"Leave them cut if possible. The machine is probably in the city, but it would be a pain if they tried something from outside the city as a diversion. I want to keep those lines cut until we've located it."

"I cannot guarantee it."

"Just do what you can."

Either way, we had no time.

The Five Battles Precipice. The demon of statistics. We only had the 3rd and 4th rounds left to figure this out and the opponent for the 3rd had already been announced. I doubted they were going to

drag this out for 6 months or a year. They would want to use the advantage they gained by Itou Helen's damage. More importantly, the Bright Cross had to be pissed after having an Archenemy get the better of them twice in a row. They had not managed to execute even one Archenemy with this new system after pulling out from their underground facility, so that was hardly surprising. That was why they wanted to end this quickly. They hated to see hope form that Itou Helen might just survive the Colosseum.

"We are going to be busy," said Maxwell.

"Yeah, this is just like summer homework. You always wish you could buy some more time in the end. But real life isn't like a game with in-app purchases."

Part 6

Lots of electricity, a cooling system, unlimited data, a foundation that could support the weight, dust and dirt protection, static electricity protection, lightning and power outage protection, shaking and vibration protection…

A supercomputer needed a lot of things, but I decided to start with the easy ones.

I gave Maxwell instructions after finishing my bath.

“Let’s start by checking the records of the power companies and communication companies.”

“Sure.”

“I doubt they just described it as a secret supercomputer, but check for any suspicious projects that fit the scope.”

“Understood.”

The power business had grown a lot more diversified lately because they were trying to separate the production of power from the distribution of power. There were probably a lot of places to check, but Maxwell came in handy because he never got tired.

…And since I could only sit around and wait, I mentally went over everything I had to do.

The most obvious ones were the records of power and data usage.

But that wasn’t actually the most important part.

“The cooling system…I guess.”

Simply gathering a bunch of computers and hooking them together in parallel was not that difficult. That was no different from a school’s computer lab or the computer classroom in a multi-tenant building near the train station. A power strip could secure the power, a hub could handle the LAN cables, and then you just had to change some of the shared settings. The only other question was how large you were going to make it.

But the cooling system was a different matter.

A normal computer used air cooling. In other words, it had a small fan. Lately, there were some that used liquid cooling where water was passed through tubes, but those 2 were the only real options.

A largescale supercomputer would use an industrial air conditioner or something like liquid nitrogen or helium. Basically, a chemical coolant was used to keep the entire huge building below freezing, just like a cold-storage warehouse at the harbor.

Liquid cooling was just barely enough for my Maxwell since he fit in a single container, but I used some pretty powerful pumps to keep all the water circulating through the long tubes that snaked all over the place.

Liquid cooling wouldn’t cut it with anything larger than that. The Bright Cross’s simulator was better than Maxwell, so they likely used something like a cold-storage warehouse. Otherwise they would need water and pumps on the scale of an aquarium.

No matter how they disguised the rest, they could not hide the cooling system.

The Bright Cross had to have the machine somewhere with lots of coolant. But what exactly would it be? Was it really in a harbor

cold-storage warehouse or a cargo ship for fruit? If they were cooling something the size of a gym to below freezing, there were only so many possible locations, so why couldn't I see where it was?

"Onii-chaaan."

Then Ayumi called out to me while lazily watching TV in the living room.

"Onee-chan says she forgot something. Did you already take a bath? Then you'd catch cold, so I guess I'll have to go."

"No, I'll go."

It was true my head was overheating. A nighttime stroll might be perfect as a change of pace. …And day or not, Ayumi wore a jogging outfit not much different from a swimsuit, so I was honestly a little worried for her. Was she letting her guard down because she was a powerful Archenemy?

"What does she need? A textbook?"

"A product a girl needs once a month."

"Bff!?"

I wanted to take back what I said, but I knew that was a lost cause. Still, wasn't having a male family member bring this to you at school about as damaging to a girl as having a female family member check under the bed or look at your internet history for a boy?

"…Well, I'll call it a win since I get to see her blush. That's pretty rare!"

"Onii-chan, you're sometimes the worst."

“I’ll be going!”

I took the cute pouch from Ayumi and left.

At night, the way to school felt different than normal.

This was the world in which Erika lived.

I pedaled the collapsible bike while conversing with the smartphone stuck in the GPS device holder.

“I have a report. The ISPs did not turn up much. Including schools, hospitals, and corporate buildings, facilities containing dozens or even hundreds of computers can be found everywhere.”

“Hospitals? I always pictured them as wanting you to keep cellphones and computers out.”

“Most modern medical devices are connected to a hospital intranet and patients’ test results are shared. I imagine they wish to eliminate the use of general-use devices because they do not want their equipment to malfunction.”

I kind of understood but kind of didn’t. If they had that many computers in the hospital, wouldn’t they cause malfunctions in each other?

“I discovered requests for a few suspicious projects at the power companies. Here are the details.”

I wasn’t reckless enough to stare at my smartphone for long periods of time while riding a bike around at night. I waited until I was stopped at a light and then scrolled through the data on the smartphone.

“Is this it? At the ski slope, in the industrial region, and at the zoo…”

“Sure.”

It was true that those places had unnaturally increased their power consumption recently. Enough that they could power a whole supercomputer. And the ski slope shouldn’t have even been running during the off season.

But I sighed.

Based on this, I would be able to end this conversation before the light changed.

“They’re probably all innocent. The industrial region is probably just an extra production line. I remember seeing a factory tour blog complaining that they had tents up for some remodeling.”

“But based on my research, there has been no change to the production count.”

“Then they’re probably doing a test run.”

Next was the zoo.

“This would be for heating. When raising animals that are susceptible to the cold, you have to heat their cages all night long. The cold has been coming back recently. If the weather data matches perfectly with the power consumption, then they’re innocent.”

“Then would it be the ski slope? They would not need to use power during the off season.”

“That would certainly make this simple. But…”

“But?”

It came back to the cooling issue. On a snowless ski slope, they

would have no way of fighting the supercomputer's heat. I doubted they were making full use of the artificial snow machines. Plus, that wouldn't be nearly enough to cool it.

"In that case, I wonder if they're running a secret casino during the off season. I've heard ski resorts all over have been struggling."

The light changed.

As I crossed the crosswalk, I belatedly realized that the light apparently didn't play its melody at night. That made sense to not cause a nuisance, but what would the people with poor eyesight do?

"In that case," said Maxwell. "Where is the Bright Cross's simulator?"

"It simply isn't possible to build a supercomputer on that scale without leaving any kind of trace. If it's in the city, there have to be hints."

I arrived at the school without finding an answer. Schools were generally frightening at night, but ours was full of people thanks to the nocturnal division. Around half the windows were lit. With that much light, a ghost would have a hard time making an appearance. …And knowing a vampire studied here through the night helped to soften the occult fear.

When I called Erika's phone to tell her I was there, she arrived in the hall trembling. It was truly rare to see her face that bright a shade of red.

"A-A-Ayumi-chaaaaaaaan!!"

"But, Erika, if it's just this once, couldn't you have stopped by a 24-hour convenience store or discount store?"

“And I’m an idiot too!!”

She really did cover her face with her hands and curl up by the wall.

To be honest, it was cute.

And when I looked down from above, I could see her red bra showing through the blouse visible at the chest of her blazer.

“Sob. Now, Satori-kun, be careful on the way back home…”

“Sure thing.”

With that, I left Erika. She had been in class, so she had to get back.

And as I walked toward the entranceway, I glanced out the hallway window.

I saw a large pool full of dark water. I had said the school wasn’t scary at night, but that area was a different matter. I guess it was frightening how the dark colors of the night kept me from seeing the bottom. At any rate, the pool looked a lot different than during the day.

I started to look away…but then I stopped walking. I looked to the pool again.

Something bothered me.

Yes. That’s’ right.

Maxwell had said he could not narrow down the possible location of the supercomputer using the data usage requirement. He had said that schools, hospitals, and corporate buildings all had dozens or hundreds of computers linked to the outside through a server.

“Ah.”

And hadn't I said that a computer above a certain size needed more than air or liquid cooling? Hadn't I said they would need an industrial air conditioner or chemical cooling using liquid nitrogen or helium in order to keep a gym-sized space cold?

Hadn't I said the only other option would be water and pumps on the scale of an aquarium?

An aquarium.

A giant pool.

"Ahh!?" I shouted without thinking.

Didn't this fit? And I saw it every day! The answer had been right in front of my eyes!!

"Maxwell! Check every school in Kukyou City. It can be elementary, middle, or high school, as long as it meets the data usage requirement! Give me a list of every one that uses enough power for a supercomputer! And this high school should be on that list. With the normal classes and the nocturnal classes, it should look like it's using twice as much power. And the power usage should be the same at all times due to having classes day and night. It won't look unnatural if it's using power at night. And the school is still running on days off because of club activities. So…!!"

At that moment, another electronic tone rang from my smartphone.

It was a video chat from…Blue Bunny Girl Karen!?

"Pin pon pon poooon! Do you know what this means? The Colosseum's 3rd round is about to begin! Everyone involved should head to the special stage indicated on the attached map. It's a live broadcast, so we will be quite strict about the time. If you're even a

second late, you won't be let in. Bye!!"

"Dammit!"

This was the worst possible timing. Yes, almost as if they had calculated it!

"What will you do?" asked Maxwell. "It is possible your advice as her second will not be of much use unless you destroy the Bright Cross's simulator. You could always choose to keep your focus on the search of the simulator."

"…"

Would I choose Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf?

Or would I choose the Bright Cross's simulator?

Which one should I focus on!?

"…Let's get to the Colosseum."

"User."

"Don't lose sight of what matters here, Maxwell. Our goal is rescuing Itou Helen. Destroying the Bright Cross is only a means to an end. We can't get that backwards."

Yes, sacrificing Itou Helen to destroy the Bright Cross would be meaningless.

With that decided, I had to get to the special stage.

The Bright Cross would not want to let Itou Helen's victories continue. Before, they had been fine with either outcome as long as one side died, but now they would likely focus on crushing Itou Helen in particular.

That meant a simulator more powerful than ours would be fully supporting the dark elf.

This time, it would go beyond a battle between two Archenemies, witch and dark elf. A battle between simulators would be underway in the background.

To be honest, I didn't think I could win in a direct battle. But I couldn't leave Itou Helen alone. She was already injured, we had almost no data on this Archenemy, and the enemy would be secretly supported by a simulator. I doubted she could overcome that on her own.

"Let's go, Maxwell."

"Sure."

"Let's defeat that dark elf and save her in the process. Save her from that goddamn Colosseum!"

[Search Engine] Operation Status [Absolute NOAH]

Power Usage: 70.4%

Cooling Efficiency: 58.8%

Processing Space Usage: 75.9%

Temporary Memory Usage: 68.5%

Unusable Memory: 2.3%

Data Loss within Cables: 0.00000000002%

Vibration Detection: Within acceptable bounds

Dust Detection: Within acceptable bounds

Backup Power: Functioning Normally (1, 2, 3)

Lightning Cutoff System: Functioning Normally

Running Tasks: 45

…

…

…

(View Details)

Manual command from official administrator detected. Creating

new task. Please input task name and processing priority level.

Task Name: Colosseum Damage Control

Processing Priority Level: Maximum

Task creation complete. Beginning calculations.

Chapter 6

Part 1

Even in the middle of the night, the strange heat and activity were obvious from the outside.

The special stage this time was a stadium outside the train station shopping area of the harbor sightseeing district.

The elliptical wall surrounding the entire stadium had more than 20 gates, but I wasn't led to any one of them. I used a staff entrance.

The stadium could hold more than 4 million people.

And that meant this Colosseum had the audience, popularity, fame, and recognition to fill those seats.

Instead of the stands up above, we were in a space that seemed half underground. We left the rarely-seen pitching practice space and continued into the team locker room.

Lockers lined the walls and a bench ran down the center.

Itou Helen was waiting in her witch outfit and with her glass wand.

"Itou-san."

"…Senpai."

I doubted it was just the cheap fluorescent lights making her face look so pale. I didn't even need to see the cold sweat on her small forehead to tell that. Shedding her skin was not enough. The damage in the 2nd round had reached the core of her body and it had stuck with her.

“It’ll be over soon,” I said.

I sensed that I needed more words to encourage her.

“I’ve found the Bright Cross’s Achilles’ heel. I can manage with about another day. They’re done for if we can get through the 3rd round. So, Itou-san, be honest with me. …How bad are your injuries?”

“I’m fine. I-…”

I didn’t let her finish.

Without warning, I lightly touched her side through the cape wrapped around her body. That was where Hanesaki Minori had beaten her so harshly the night before.

The touch was as light as the stroke of a feather.

But Itou Helen’s shoulders reacted by dramatically hopping upwards.

“Ah, ghhh!?”

“…I knew it.”

I did my best to keep the emotion from my face as I spoke slowly.

“That must hurt a lot. Is this…broken?”

“…I-it’s better than it could be. The ribs are at least properly connected.”

The small animal of a blonde girl tearfully answered me while trembling.

So was it like the grooves in a chocolate bar? They were connected,

but it wasn't perfect, so even the slightest shock would cause them to break.

"Does anything else in particular hurt?"

"Not really…"

"If you won't tell me, I'll touch all over your body to find the answer."

"O-okyay! I'll tell you!!"

Itou Helen blushed, rubbed her risqué bare legs together, and trembled as she counted off each injured place with her slender fingers.

There were a lot of them.

In fact, her red-manicured fingers weren't enough. Apparently blocking two metal clubs barehanded was too much even for a witch.

And when her life was on the line, the dark elf's team would of course have checked over the recorded footage again and again.

…As would the simulator of the malicious Bright Cross.

"Maxwell."

"Sure. Without accurate equipment, I can only base this on her self-analysis, but Itou Helen can likely only produce 65% of her physical ability."

The number might not mean much to you, but that meant she had been weakened to the point that running full speed would not look at all like full speed. If she grappled with someone and rolled along the floor, she might just collapse from within.

“So I guess we can’t let her get close to Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf.”

“Sure. Also, her opponent will likely actively target the injured areas. But if we know that in advance, we can take advantage of it.”

“Oh, I get it. If she puts a poison stinger there…”

Of course, it would be best not to take any more damage to those injured areas. But if that was not an option, we would need to knock out our opponent as quickly as possible. And if the other side learned about the poison stingers, she might hesitate to attack.

The blue bunny girl’s voice rang from the speaker on the wall.

“Pin pon pon poooon! Okay, okay. All related individuals, please hurry to the special stage. Let’s go all out and provide the hottest form of entertainment around!!”

“…This isn’t going to be an easy battle,” I honestly admitted. “But if they set up this ridiculous situation, it means they’re panicking. Freedom is within reach. The Bright Cross are the ones in a bind here. So let’s overcome this 3rd round.”

“Right. If you say so, Senpai.”

An official guided us down a long, long passageway.

Our information on the dark elf felt inadequate because I had been so focused on the supercomputer. And unlike vampires or zombies, the amount of texts on them seemed minimal. The only clues the Class Rep had given me were elflock and elfshot.

Tying up a person’s hair or a horse’s mane.

Wielding an invisible flint arrow or fire iron to cause mysterious, intense pain.

“Is that so…?”

The blonde girl in a witch’s hat sounded impressed, but to be honest, this power would not have seemed very frightening had Itou Helen been healthy. A potion that remade humans into monsters seemed much more flashy and frightening.

The lingering damage was the worst part by far.

The Five Battles Precipice. The demon of statistics. The Bright Cross simulator that had designed that weighed on me like a heavy shadow.

Then we arrived at the stadium’s entrance gate.

We had yet to enter, but the loud cheering reached us as a vibration. The blue bunny girl was probably getting the crowd worked up with her mic performance. I could tell the vibration was irregularly rising and falling like a wave.

“Let’s get started.”

“Yes. Let’s do this, Senpai.”

We faced hell together.

The Colosseum’s 3rd round, the fight to the death with Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf, was finally beginning.

Part 2

“Ladies and gentlemen! If you look in this corner, you’ll see Itou Helen the Witch who is our repeating champion in the Colosseum! What ever happened to that adorable girly face when she started!? Now all I see is a man-eating witch! I hope you’re all ready to fill your wallets tonight as well!”

The light was dreadfully bright and the deluge of sound shook my entire body. The blue bunny girl stood atop the giant die-shaped bug cage in the center of the field and she held a mic to her hot mouth to increase the madness of the audience.

I glanced over at Itou Helen.

She pulled her feathered witch’s hat deep over her eyes to hide her expression. This was not something she could ever get used to. I could tell her small heart was close to being crushed by the malicious announcer and the unquestioning passionate cheers of the audience.

“And in this corner we have Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf! Will this unknown newcomer become a dark horse? You never know what’s going to happen in the world of gambling! Simply believing in the odds is a good way of going broke. But either way, let’s see what happens!”

The concentrated fire of the bright spotlights revealed a small but slender girl. She had brown skin that looked well-tanned and long, silver hair. She wore a thin, white sleeveless blouse and a tight skirt. The fabric must have been really thin because the brown of her skin showed through the white in places. For shoes, she wore long boots that rose past her knees. …And her ears were as pointy

as you would expect. She must have been able to move them at will because they would sometimes shake and point this way and that like a cat's.

She carried a quiver at her hip and her left hand held a composite longbow that looked like a combination of wood and animal tendons.

So they weren't even bothering to hide their weapon this time.

But what was this? The quiver didn't have any of the crucial arrows inside?

The second was a plump middle-aged man who looked twice her age. I was hardly one to talk, but I had trouble telling what their connection was. But if he had made an enemy of the world to stick with the dark elf for this long, he couldn't be a bad person. They looked nothing alike, but it was possible he was her father or another relative.

"By the way, you outdid us again last time, so we'll be updating our method for confirming the Archenemy's death."

…*Not again.*

"From now on, the Archenemy in question will be covered in gasoline and set alight. The corpse might be a little grotesque when you take it with you, but you don't mind, do you? It's just a corpse, after all!"

I didn't have the right to object either way. We would have to find a way to take advantage of that condition to overcome it.

But why?

They could always forbid all tricks or simply strip us of the right to take the corpse with us. Why did they leave any possibility at all? Of

course, I wasn't about to ask that because I didn't want those big, round eyes to light up as she said, "Nice idea! Then we'll do that!"

Or were they leaving a glimpse of possibility so we would go for it and get more badly injured?

"Senpai, in that case…"

"Yeah. Let's overcome it this time too."

I handed her the small earpiece and watched the small witch walk forward with cape fluttering behind her.

The brown-skinned Archenemy also quietly entered the bug cage.

It bothered me that the middle-aged second was holding a hand to one ear.

…*An earpiece?*

The fighter was one thing, but the second shouldn't need one. And he didn't seem used to it, so had the Bright Cross given it to him? A connection to the people running the game was hardly fair, but lives were on the line. I wasn't confident I could have resisted the temptation had I been in his shoes.

"Warning: I have detected a cyber attack on your smartphone and am just barely holding it back."

"Already? Maxwell, how long can you last?"

"It is hard to say. In addition to the simple difference in specs, the device cannot be entirely isolated because the line between the smartphone and me and the connection to Itou Helen's earpiece must remain intact."

"Put a pi trap in the blank space of the packets. Make it so an

attempt at analysis will get them stuck in an infinite calculation.”

“Sure. Although this will have little effect if the Bright Cross machine is capable of logical thought and not just simple calculations.”

Inside the bug cage, Itou Helen and Muramatsu Yukie faced each other from a distance of a few meters.

The blue bunny girl placed a hand on her skinny waist, peered down at the living sacrifices from atop the bug cage, and made an announcement through the mic.

“Now, let’s get this night started! Who will win: the witch or the dark elf!? The Colosseum’s 3rd round, a death match with no time limit, begins now!!”

A low and deep buzzer sounded like when a cell door opened in a prison.

The first to move was Muramatsu Yukie.

She took a few steps back and did not hesitate to draw the bowstring. All of her muscles tensed and her slender chest bent slightly back.

But she didn’t seem to have an arrow nocked…?

It was almost like she was pantomiming, but we did not have time to wait around. Itou Helen’s glass wand was not a cane that an old person used to take a walk. It was possible that bow was in its completed form. It could be an occult weapon that borrowed some cruel power for the dark elf.

And only one thing came to mind:

“The flint arrow! Elfshot!”

Firing an invisible arrow caused intense pain of unknown cause in whoever it hit.

It could split the skin, paralyze the entire body, or create bruises where you don't remember hitting anything.

"Maxwell, make ballistic predictions! For both straight lines and curves!"

"Sure. The arrow cannot be visually confirmed, but its size can be calculated from how far back the bowstring is drawn. There are 5 patterns in all. I have discovered a safe spot that dodges all patterns. I will display it on the screen footage."

"Itou-sa-…!"

I trailed off as I shouted her name.

Itou Helen tried to cautiously move back, but then she tripped.

It was obvious what had happened.

The straps of her shoes had gotten tangled together like unmanaged cables. It was almost like a small child's prank. But a skill that prevented anyone from escaping was too perfect a combination with a projectile weapon!!

"Elflock!? Dammit!!"

It didn't matter how much we predicted if Itou Helen couldn't move.

Then something tore through the air.

The reverberating roar sounded like a giant balloon had been pierced by a sharp needle.

The blonde girl's small body arched backwards like a bow. While lying on her back, her body rose more than 20cm from the floor.

What…was that?

Not even kicking her in her wounds would cause that dramatic a reaction!

As I watched Itou Helen crash back to the floor, scream, and writhe around so intensely I thought she was going to tear her dress, Maxwell gave a warning.

"Itou Helen is showing a certain pattern to her movements. She appears to be shifting her body weight to protect her right side."

"Oh, no…"

If we could tell that, so could the dark elf's side via the Bright Cross's simulator. They would focus their attacks there!

For a brief moment, brown-skinned Muramatsu Yukie came to a stop, spread her legs despite her tight skirt to firmly plant her feet on the floor, and adjusted her grip on the bow. But we could not make good use of that opportunity. Once again, she drew the bowstring without nocking an arrow and took accurate aim.

This was the elfshot that used a flint arrow.

There was no visible blood, but it had to provide an impact even greater than a stun gun. This was a horrible matchup for Itou Helen who was fighting while hiding her injury.

"Maxwell, it doesn't matter if we can see the arrow or not! Find every possible ballistic path Muramatsu Yukie can use from here. Then search for a nearby safe zone Itou Helen can roll to in order to avoid them all!"

“Sure. I will provide the coordinates.”

We supposedly had an accurate evasion spot.

I supposedly passed that onto Itou Helen.

The witch supposedly worked hard to do as told.

And yet.

The nightmarish sound rang out once more. Itou Helen’s body rolled over, her back arched, and her mouth opened beyond the limit as she screamed. Her risqué bare legs thrashed wildly around.

“What happened, Maxwell!?”

“No. My ballistic calculations were certain and Itou Helen moved as instructed. If she was still hit, then the initial conditions were wrong. Is your opponent using a magic arrow that can turn at right angles?”

If so, there was nothing we could do. She was already using invisible arrows, but did this mean they could unpredictably turn any which way as they pursued Itou Helen? There was no way we could beat that!

Meanwhile, the dark elf with long, silver hair maintained her stance even in her superior position. She kept her distance, spread her legs, and drew the bowstring. There still was no arrow. No, I just couldn’t see it. All I could do was glare resentfully inside the bug cage.

…

But, no, wait…

“Maxwell, have you recorded all of Muramatsu Yukie’s actions so

far? Reanalyze her actions up until she draws the bow. We don't have time, so hurry!"

"Sure. If you have time for meaningless demands, then please provide more precise instructions."

"She must be nocking invisible arrows. But where is she carrying them? There's nothing inside that thing that looks like a quiver. She also doesn't reach toward her hips or back. The dark elf just reaches for the bow. She ignores the part where she grabs an arrow and pulls it out!"

I had no proof of anything.

But all I could do now was look into any theory I had.

"Perhaps drawing the magic bow causes an unlimited supply of magic arrows to appear," suggested Maxwell.

"Perhaps. But isn't there another possibility? Muramatsu Yukie isn't pulling an arrow out of anywhere. In fact, there might not be an invisible arrow at all."

My chat with the Class Rep replayed in the back of my mind.

English elves used invisible arrows made of flint to cause mysterious pain in people. There was a wide variety of results: cutting the skin like a Kamaitachi, paralyzing the body, or mystery bruises.

But why that wide variety?

If those were just multiple results and types of damage from a single phenomenon…

"Maxwell, pay special attention to Muramatsu Yukie's bowstring and the fingers holding it. Is there some kind of liquid or powder on

them?”

“Sure. Your smartphone camera is not the most reliable source of information, but I can indeed see something white on Muramatsu Yukie’s fingers.”

“It could be salt or iron sand. It’s probably something that conducts electricity.”

That would explain the unnatural way Itou Helen moved in response.

“The dark elf fires the fine dust she’s rubbed on the bowstring and she sends electricity out over that ballistic path! That could suddenly cut the skin, paralyze your body, or create bruises from internal bleeding. It fits all of the Class Rep’s info. It was an electric shock! That’s why your ballistic predictions failed! Recalculate it using a powder and a high-voltage current!!”

The exact voltage and amperage were unknown, but a high-voltage current would cause irregular movement of the organs and muscles. That was obvious from the fact that they were used in medical AEDs. And AEDs would warn you not to use them if you suspected the patient had damage to their sternum. At this rate, Itou Helen’s involuntary movements could harm her organs with her own ribs!

“Itou-san! Can you fight back as a jellyfish like we discussed!?”

“Kh.”

With what sounded like a breath through clenched teeth, Itou Helen grabbed her glass wand again even as she writhed on the floor.

Immediately, something like 9 translucent tails shot out from the

back of her black dress's hips and rose up along her cape. They were the jellyfish tentacles she had used in the 1st round against Kuroyama Hinoki the Mermaid.

But her opponent interfered before she could use them.

The 9 tentacles twisted around in a way Itou Helen herself clearly did not want. They tangled around each other and kept themselves from moving like unmanaged cables.

Elflock.

That power seemed pretty boring, but it also seemed to have a wide variety of uses. I could only feel thankful if wasn't enough to directly tie knots in Itou Helen's blood vessels or intestines.

And it did not matter if she could not swing around the jellyfish tentacles. That wasn't how they were used.

"Sure. Continue as is. Please respond to Muramatsu Yukie's elfshot. If she fails to, the next attack will do serious damage to her right lung."

"Itou-san!!"

"Right!"

Just as I desperately called out to her, the 9 tentacles rapidly dried out. They grew white, crumbled like a tower of sand, and blew away in the wind.

A jellyfish's poison stinger was still effective when dried out into a powder. The ancient ninja had even blown the powder into their enemies' eyes to blind them.

The invisible arrow was fired soon thereafter.

The wafting poison stinger powder had come from a living creature…which meant it too conducted electricity. Before, the high-voltage current had been kept just below the level that would produce sparks, but now it burst and scattered. Several bluish-white branches passed right by the blonde witch. Her slender throat also trembled as she swallowed her own colorful potion. A giant crab pincer emerged from her sleeve and she cut the tied-together shoe straps.

Finally free, the small girl stood up.

The dark elf with her skin color showing through her sleeveless blouse pulled a small bottle of a clear liquid from her pocket. I doubted she was hoping to outdo a Circe witch with poisons. She was probably increasing the conductivity of the bowstring to send out a spray to punch her high-voltage arrow through the jellyfish powder.

But it was too late.

She was still setting everything up, but our preparations were complete.

“Itou-san! It doesn’t matter how, just create some wind!!”

As soon as I gave that instruction, the blonde girl drank a colorful liquid. A flapping sound left the back of her black dress and her cape flew backwards as swan wings burst out.

They almost looked like angel wings.

But the mass of disturbed air shoved the microscopic dried poison stingers forward. Yes, they approached the dark elf like a solid wall.

The distance did not matter.

“Kyaaaaah!!!???”

With a shrill scream, Muramatsu Yukie's large bow and small bottle fell to the floor. The elfshot was an invisible arrow created by a high-voltage current that followed the path formed in the air by the conductive powder or liquid covering the bowstring. Without her weapon, that attack was over.

Unable to nock an arrow, the beautiful and healthily brown girl covered her face with both hands. When dried, the jellyfish tentacles did not retain 100% of their toxicity. Since a ninja only used it to blind an enemy, it obviously was not deadly on contact.

But it could be plenty fatal when it took out your eyes in a life-or-death situation.

Itou Helen released the large pincer and wings.

Her small, red-manicured hand manipulated the glass wand and prepared a new potion.

…Was it over?

Did she just have to sprinkle a transformation potion on the dark elf to trick the death confirmation and retrieve Muramatsu Yukie in a state of apparent death?

It didn't sit right with me.

What had happened to the Bright Cross's simulation? They couldn't afford to let Itou Helen win any longer. They couldn't allow her to develop a potion that freely switched between Archenemy and human. So would they really give us victory so easily?

"Maxwe-…"

It happened just as I called out in confusion.

Itou Helen had filled an empty bottle with a colorful potion and she

used her risqué bared legs to approach Muramatsu Yukie who still covered her face with her hands. Except a moment later, the dark elf's right hand moved without warning. She held a sparking fire iron that she had apparently stored on the side of her boot that rose above her knees but below her short tight skirt.

"Warning: The elfshot is not necessarily a bow and arrow. You were also told it could be a direct attack from a fire iron."

Oh, no. Was she hiding a close-range weapon!?

"Ah!"

That was Itou Helen's voice.

She had let go of the potion bottle in an unnatural pose. She seemed to have forcibly twisted her body to avoid a direct hit from the high-voltage current, but that had caused the bottle to slip from her red-manicured fingers. The colorful bottle spun through the air and fell straight down toward Itou Helen's head.

Oh, no. She's going to get soaked by her own potion!!

That's what I thought.

But that wasn't what happened.

As we watched, the blonde girl placed a pill in her mouth. The already torn back of her black dress swelled out and then 8 bug legs burst out along her cape.

A spider.

Just as that name came to mind, the airborne bottle came to an unnatural stop. It was caught by a thick thread. Then with a powerful swing, the finishing-blow potion finally slammed into the dark elf's face.

She uttered a deafening scream like the earth had split open and a demon had emerged.

The dark elf's beautiful body bubbled up and a giant mountain of flesh and blood grew out. It grew until it reached the bug cage's ceiling and finally stopped.

Did we…win?

Can I…look at it that way?

"What's this!? Is this the end for Muramatsu Yukie!? Hello!? She doesn't seem to be responding!! The Colosseum's 3rd round goes to Itou Helen the Witch! Has she become the Colosseum's prize queen!?"

The rumbling cheer sounded distant.

We had won and survived, but it didn't seem real. Itou Helen held her side and looked back my way, but she too looked puzzled.

"Now, now! As promised, we'll be confirming her death before handing over the corpse! Officials, bring in the gasoline and matches."

Normally, my hair should have stood on end, but I wasn't actually that panicked.

In fact, that mountain of flesh reached the ceiling of that 15m bug cage. Even if they dumped gasoline on the outside, the heat wouldn't reach the center. Itou Helen must have come up with the idea when she heard the method. From there, we only had to take the scorched mountain and cut out the beautiful girl inside.

That was what I thought as I watched them dumping the contents of several plastic containers on it.

But I was too naïve.

It happened just as an official threw a lit match at it.

The flames did indeed cover the surface.

But more than that, black smoke erupted with incredible intensity. The die-shaped bug cage was filled with the unhealthy-looking color in no time.

And Itou Helen was still inside.

The black smoke of that incomplete combustion would contain carbon monoxide.

“What the hell are you doing!?”

I quickly opened the door from outside and charged inside the bug cage.

I regretted it 2 seconds later.

My eyes and nose were immediately taken out. This wasn’t just black smoke. Was it mixed with the dried jellyfish stingers and was the heat of the flames creating wild air currents!?

“Cough, cough cough!!”

Covering my mouth didn’t help. I couldn’t breathe in properly with this scorching wall hitting me. The inside of the bug cage was like a giant gas chamber.

The Bright Cross had a largescale simulator, so I doubted they were wildly reacting to unexpected developments. This had been their aim from the start. If the dark elf defeated us, that was fine. But if not, they could disguise it as an accident. The rules of the Colosseum meant nothing!

At any rate, I had to grab Itou Helen and get out of here as quickly as possible.

Where? Where was she?

I reached around randomly but felt nothing. In fact, I couldn't even read the messages on the smartphone in my hand. I couldn't even get Maxwell's help now!

And just as I realized that, I felt something in that black world tug on my other hand.

"Sen…pai…! Cough!!"

It was Itou Helen with her cape covering her mouth.

I had tried to save her, but she had saved me instead. Still, I was glad we had managed to meet up.

Immediately afterwards, a small red light silently moved across the side of her head. Thanks to the black smoke, I could see a red line of light extending out from it. Visibility was poor, but it probably came from outside the bug cage.

A laser…pointer!?

"Itou-san!!"

I quickly grabbed her slender shoulders in my arms.

A moment later, I heard the high-pitched sound of the reinforced glass wall shattering and the air current changed. The contained black smoke flowed out to escape.

…A sniper?

That had been a close shave.

I could seriously see a few strands of blonde hair floating in the black smoke.

They intended to end this here no matter what. It would normally be difficult to accurately target a girl's head in this black smoke, but the Bright Cross could pull it off.

They had a simulator greater than Maxwell.

"What do we do…?"

It would be difficult to escape the bug cage in this smoke. And even if we did, we were in a stadium. The empty field continued for dozens of meters and we could be shot at any point along the way.

Of course, the Bright Cross would want to preserve the rules of their sports tournament, so they would want to shoot her to death within the smoky bug cage so they could fool the result of the autopsy and claim there were no odd injuries on the burnt corpse. But I had no idea how far they would bother preserving that ideal hope.

The small girl in my arms tugged on my shirt.

"Senpai, um…"

No, was she leading me somewhere?

But she was leading me in the opposite direction of the door I had entered through.

In fact, she was leading me toward the mountain spewing black smoke.

"Unfortunately, we can't retrieve the dark elf this time. We'll be shot as we try!"

“N-no, not that. Well, that is an issue, but, um…”

Itou Helen hesitated but did not alter her opinion.

And she finally continued.

“I think that place would be best.”

[Search Engine] Their Fate [Absolute NOAH]

And.

As the deadly furnace continued burning for more than an hour, the blue bunny girl used her mic performance to keep everyone's attention. She guided everyone to evacuate while making sure to inform them that they a clear winner had been declared, which meant their bets would pay off (or not) and the match would not be considered void.

"Ah, ahh, ahhhhh…"

The middle-aged man who acted as the dark elf's second fell to his knees.

Fire extinguisher foam was sprayed throughout the bug cage and the dark smoke was finally cleared. But what remained was truly awful. Not only was there a scorched mountain, but burst hunks of flesh had splattered everywhere. Which had come from the mountain and which were Amatsu Satori or Itou Helen? It was impossible to tell them apart.

"Wh-what happened to my daughter…!?"

"Yes, that's a good question there."

"You told me she was sure to win if I did what you said!"

"No, I told you she was sure to defeat her enemy if you did what we said. And look: there's nothing left of that enemy, is there?"

He did not seem to even have enough strength left to shout in

anger.

He needed the core of his life to call up such dramatic emotions, but that had completely broken.

An official asked a question over the blue bunny girl's earpiece.

"What should we do?"

"There's no need to hand over the corpse this time, so…oh, I know. Carry it out to the 'bathtub'."

A large trailer truck quietly left the staff entrance at the back of the stadium.

The young male driver spoke in an uncomfortable voice as he held the steering wheel.

"How far should we carry the 'bathtub'?"

The woman in the passenger seat readily answered while munching on a cookie.

"To the iron and steel industrial complex by the harbor. We've always disposed of inconvenient things by dumping it into a blast furnace or freezing it underground at the South Pole, right?"

"…"

"Yes, yes. Be clever about it. Anything inconvenient to the Bright Cross is a definite negative to your life."

The large truck drove through the dark streets.

And finally…

The container held by the trailer forcefully burst open from within.

There was no need to silence the Bright Cross people. The trailer was a large vehicle with its weight balanced for use with the heavy container on top. With the container suddenly gone, it lost control and crashed into a telephone pole on its own.

Meanwhile, a few people emerged from the burst container: a human, a witch, and a dark elf.

"…We're saved," said Amatsu Satori as he wiped sweat from his brow.

With the black smoke and the sniper rifle targeting them, they had fled "inside" the mountain of flesh and blood that Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf had become. It had been designed so the heat would not reach the center even when it was drenched in gasoline and set aflame and the rifle bullet which could break the reinforced glass could not pierce the meters-thick shield of flesh. From there, they only had to be taken out of the stadium as a corpse and wait for a good opportunity to escape.

Of course, they might have run out of oxygen within the sealed space of flesh. But Itou Helen had once more come in handy. Simply put, she had used a potion to chemically(?) produce oxygen. That could not have been too difficult a task to a witch who could directly use something as ridiculous as wind magic.

"You just keep saving me this time, Itou-san…"

"A-all I've done is have you carry me around on your back, Senpai."

The blonde witch leaned forward as she clenched her fists in front of her chest and breathed from her nose.

The brown-skinned dark elf toyed with her bangs in exasperation.

“So what do we do now? I doubt the Bright Cross will allow it to end like this.”

“For the time being, I have to confirm what Itou-san’s standing in the Bright Cross is after this incident.”

Since they were paying out on bets, the match itself counted as legitimate, but if they found fault in Itou Helen for leaving the stadium without permission, they could always order that the escapee be shot on sight. That meant returning to the Bright Cross with her hands in the air might only earn her a bullet between the eyes.

So would they stay on the run? The Bright Cross was a giant organization that covered not just Japan but more than 100 countries around the world. Even if they did skip town in the night, they would not be safe. In fact, a boy and girl without any real preparations would have trouble merely running away from home, so skipping town was completely out of the question. In a long-term battle, they would obviously be tracked down by the Bright Cross.

But they were also close to reaching the Bright Cross’s Achilles’ heel.

The group had a mysterious simulator boasting accuracy greater than Maxwell’s. And he had an idea where it might be located.

Even if they could not crush the Bright Cross all across the world, they might be able to drive the group out of Kukyou City.

They had a chance of winning a short-term showdown.

“For now, let’s hide somewhere the Bright Cross won’t find us.”

“I-is there anywhere like that…?”

Itou Helen sounded doubtful, but Amatsu Satori waved his smartphone.

“Maxwell, where’s the closest entrance?”

“Sure. There is a stairway leading into a subway station 10m northwest of your current position. That should lead to one of the doors.”

“Once we’re inside, interfere with the door’s control program. Rewrite all the password locks.”

The two girls tilted their heads, so Amatsu Satori added more.

“It’s true the Bright Cross’s influence can be found almost everywhere and I get the feeling they’d see us on security cameras no matter where we hide. But there is one large area which I know the Bright Cross doesn’t cover.”

He raised his index finger and then pointed straight down.

“The underground facility they pulled out of themselves. They removed all of their equipment, so there aren’t any cameras or sensors. They can’t possibly cover that area.”

Chapter 7

Part 1

That vast underground space naturally had no windows. Once inside, everything was ruled by a thick darkness in which we couldn't see our hands in front of our faces.

I had considered buying a flashlight, but we didn't have time to visit a discount store. Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf had a quick charger for a smartphone, so I used my phone's backlight. And we entered the underground space. We opened the kind of thick round door found in a bank vault and stepped inside.

…Who would have thought this horrific dark side of Kukyou City would ever actually save our lives?

Maxwell had overwritten the thick door's lock, so the Bright Cross's key couldn't open it. Even if they brute forced it open using their simulator, the passageways spread out like a spider web and connected to the entire city. We could escape to anywhere and not even the Bright Cross could hope to cover all of that.

"W-wow. What is this…place?"

In her black dress and feathered witch's hat, Itou Helen sounded half impressed and half worried as she looked around the tunnel with a hemispherical cross-section.

I simply responded that it was the remains of a former Bright Cross underground facility.

There was no need to explain what exactly had been done here.

"Maxwell."

“Sure.”

“Monitor Itou Helen’s home, Muramatsu Yukie’s home, and my home. Even if they’re being watched from outside by cameras, we should be able to slip inside from below the houses undetected. And that includes the city’s security cameras and satellite cameras. Let’s gather what food, water, and other necessities we can from our houses. It would be best to end this quickly, but we don’t know how many days we’ll be holed up for.”

I wanted to laugh at the dark humor of fooling them with the system they had built. I hoped I could repay them for the many Archenemies who had lost their lives here.

…I honestly wanted to go home, climb in bed, and go to sleep.

But I couldn’t have the Bright Cross directly attacking my house. To prevent that, it would be safest to make sure not even my family knew where I was.

The information you had wasn’t everything.

Not knowing could sometimes be a weapon of its own.

“And, Itou-san. How much of the chemicals taken from the Colosseum do you have left?”

“Um, I have most of the full set left, but…hyah.”

That was good.

My underclassman had colorful test tubes hidden in the decorative sash of her hat, in her sleeves, and on her thighs, so I rubbed her head like I did with Ayumi.

Even with Archenemies, we were terribly unreliable compared to the Bright Cross who could send in machineguns. The dark elf’s

attacks were generally used to stop her opponent and lacked immediacy. I was only a scrawny guy. Our only hopes were Maxwell's processing power and Itou Helen's potions.

There were 3 things we had to do:

1. Secure our safety for the time being.

2. Wait until Itou Helen could heal her injuries.

3. Destroy the Bright Cross's simulator.

The brown-skinned dark elf was apparently going to help us for now. Her corpse had not been "handed over" yet, so she had yet to be released. If the Bright Cross recovered her, who could say what they would do with her.

"But do you know where they're hiding such a large computer? That must be top secret information even among the Bright Cross."

"It would be, but I do know."

It had to be there.

If they hadn't begun the 3rd round so suddenly, I might have been able to deal with it then.

"Public Kukyou 1st High School. That's my school. It has to be there."

Part 2

I didn't know why something like that would be at my school. Or why the Bright Cross would have a connection there.

But it fit all the conditions.

It used a lot of data and electricity even at night and circulating the pool water could be used for a cooling system.

I wanted to run right in there and ruin it all. I wanted to swing a giant hammer around and smash it all to bits.

But.

"…Senpai?"

Itou Helen looked up at me as she leaned against the wall of the hemispherical tunnel and held her glass wand in both hands.

It helped a lot that we had visited each of our houses to gather blankets, freeze-dried food, and a simple lamp from some camping supplies. The light would last longer than my smartphone's backlight, we had warmth, and we could boil water.

That meant we had food, but the girls seemed happy that they could soak a towel in hot water and wipe down their bodies.

We focused on letting battered Itou Helen rest as much as possible to recover.

"How are your injuries doing?"

"I'm fine. I can fight at any time…"

“Be honest. Do you want me to rub your body again?”

“Okyay!”

She must have remembered the pain because her face grew a bit red and she curled up within her cape.

“B-but the potion really is working. In another day or two, I think my ribs will be fully healed.”

This reminded me that Itou Helen, with her free control over those colorful potions, really was an Archenemy. Finding a way to fully heal broken ribs in a day or two would win her a Nobel Prize and let her start a pharmaceutical company.

“U-um, if you’re in a hurry, you can leave me here and go on ahead…”

“Maxwell is the only one who can freely open and close the doors when the Bright Cross gets in. If we leave you here, you’ll be trapped.”

“But.”

“It’s true I want to make use of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But they can’t move such a largescale supercomputer so easily.”

The Bright Cross had pulled out of this underground space so cleanly that that was probably an option they were considering. But the conditions needed for a supercomputer were complex and few facilities qualified. And transporting it while powered on would definitely be out of the question. If it took a week or two to get it set up again at the next location, the machine would essentially be committing suicide. I would just have to use Maxwell to his fullest to end this before they could switch the simulator back on.

The Bright Cross would have to be fearful of Maxwell’s presence.

We were targeting their simulator, but they would have to defeat us before they could safely transport the simulator.

So I wasn't worried.

Our odds of success increased significantly if we waited for Itou Helen to regain her full strength to use her glass wand.

She was an Archenemy, but unlike a vampire like Erika or a zombie like Ayumi, she could fully control the scope of her infection. It didn't stand out as much, but that let her use it without holding back. It was like the difference between a nuclear bomb and a GPS precision-guided aerial bomb. Looking at it that way, Itou Helen might have the advantage.

In fact.

Despite how cornered we were, running crying to Erika or Ayumi still did not seem like a realistic option.

I could do it.

But if I did, I would be crossing the point of no return. Or so it seemed to me.

"This place really reminds you how big the Bright Cross is."

That comment was made by Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf.

All of the doors were locked, but that girl in a sleeveless blouse and tight skirt spent all her spare time exploring the spider web of passageways with longbow in hand.

Incidentally, with all of the equipment removed, this underground space was like a large and complexly-arranged box. There were no barriers for when Itou Helen or Muramatsu Yukie wiped their bodies down with a wet towel or changed clothes. But I did my best

to keep my distance so we wouldn't meet.

Yes, I did my best.

But for some reason, the passageways would loop back around on themselves and I would receive either a tearful slap or a ton of high-voltage arrows from a half-naked girl, but I was generally enjoying myself!

"User, I have a report."

"?"

Maxwell sent a message after I moved a bit away from Itou Helen.

"It concerns the sniper shot that nearly hit Itou Helen at the end of the 3rd round."

"Oh…"

That did happen, didn't it?

On the pretext of confirming the Archenemy's death by covering its corpse in gasoline and burning it, they had induced an incomplete combustion and filled the space with carbon monoxide smoke to kill Itou Helen in what looked like an accident. And the Bright Cross had even brought out a silent sniper rifle to try to shoot her in the head inside the bug cage.

"Given the conditions at the time of the shot, that was not a normal rifle bullet. It was most likely a .45 subsonic round, but then it would not break through the reinforced glass made to hold an Archenemy. In that case, I can estimate that the bullet was made from tungsten, depleted uranium, or another metal with a heavier relative density than lead."

"Make it simpler."

“Sure. That means it is extremely quiet and highly destructive, but it should also reduce the stability and make the ballistic path waver. Accurately firing such an idiosyncratic sniper unit would require special skills. Simulator support is not enough to explain it.”

For example, I couldn’t win a gold medal in figure skating just because I had Maxwell’s support. I would also need a mind and body able to keep up with the displayed instructions.

“…So was the Bright Cross just showing off their soldiers’ specs? What does that matter?”

“User. When Miss Erika the Vampire and Miss Ayumi the Zombie settled things in the simulator, do you remember fighting the Bright Cross in this underground space?”

“Hm? What about it?”

“It was only within the simulator, but there was a member who used a submachinegun – or rather, an odd sniper unit with full-auto functionality added on – that was equipped with .45 subsonic heavy metal rounds.”

The suspect’s face and name appeared on the screen.

I normally wouldn’t have cared. Every member of the Bright Cross was an enemy, so my opinion of any particular one was irrelevant. That should have been enough.

But not in this case.

I couldn’t ignore this.

I finally understood why Maxwell had waited to report this until I was away from Itou Helen in her black dress, witch hat, and large cape.

The name listed there was Itou Tamago.

“What…does this mean?”

“Sure. He seems to be Itou Helen’s blood-related older brother. Unless there is an error in the simulation results, he is a Bright Cross member. He is also part of a field team and one of the few capable of using an extremely idiosyncratic sniper unit that uses.45 subsonic heavy metal rounds.”

No, not that.

That wasn’t what I was asking.

“Then…Itou-san just about had her brains blown out by her own family member…?”

I couldn’t believe it even as the words left my mouth. This was as much of a shock as learning that the town I lived in was used to dispose of Archenemies.

Part 3

As I watched, Itou Helen hesitantly raised both hands and stretched in her black dress and large cape. Then she slowly twisted her hips around.

She was moving her entire body while probably focusing on her ribs. After a while, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“It seems I’m fine. I don’t feel any pain…”

“Really? You aren’t just saying that like before?”

“Hyes!”

“See? I just touched you a little and your shoulders jumped. What about here? Are you fine here?”

“U-um, Senpai, uh, eek…”

I was only worried about her, but the dark elf snuck up behind me and chopped the back of my head. Then my blushing and tearful underclassman clung to and hid behind Muramatsu Yukie whose thin sleeveless blouse allowed her skin color to show through. *Well, as long as she’s feeling better.*

“If you’re done with your amateur game of doctor, what are we going to do now?”

“Game of doctor…? Gulp. I didn’t realize that casual exchange contained such a meaningful metaphor. Okay, let’s try that again…!!”

“Get to the point. And quickly.”

The dark elf drew the bowstring and aimed the invisible arrow at point-blank range, so I did everything I could to look the other way and put my hands up.

Please don't shock me. Unlike a punch or a kick, I'm not even sure how to brace for that!!

"I-if Itou-san is healed, then we don't have to wait around any longer, so I was thinking we could go destroy the Bright Cross's simulator…"

"I see." The tight skirt dark elf slowly lowered her bow and gave me a dubious look. "But in all seriousness, is that possible?"

"It won't be easy. But there's no surviving this unless we overcome this challenge."

We just had to think about it a bit. I was unarmed, so did I stand any chance of escaping a group with Maxwell-level support if I fled through Kukyou City?

…To be honest, I wasn't confident I could last even a day. That was partially due to the simulator, but they could also just overwhelm me with pure numbers. They could completely surround me and secure me with minimal time and effort. If I couldn't avoid that chemical reaction, we were in trouble.

So we traveled through the vast underground space to arrive directly below the school. We could move safely, but we could not use the trains or buses. I had left my collapsible bike at the stadium. And even if I did have it, riding it through the dark with Itou Helen on the front and Muramatsu Yukie on the back would have been too difficult.

I also wanted to avoid bringing up Itou Helen's brother if at all possible. I worked at directing the conversation elsewhere.

“By the way.”

“?”

“There’s been a witch and a mermaid, but why is a dark elf considered an Archenemy? I know your lifespan might be incredibly long, but, y’know, I’ve never heard of you quickly growing in number like with a vampire or zombie.”

“…You’re bringing that up just because you’re bored? That’s kind of the most important aspect of my life, you know?” The brown-skinned girl sighed. “In my case, the infection level is low. We only have one way of interacting with humans and encroaching on society.”

“Hm? Do elves bite people or something?”

I only really saw them as people living in the forest, so I couldn’t even imagine how they lived. They seemed about as real as a ghost standing on the side of the road. And this was a dark one.

“Kh.”

But Muramatsu Yukie’s words seemed to catch in her throat as she blushed, pouted her lips, and muttered to herself.

After a while, she gave in and answered with her long ears lying flat.

“Y-you know. There are half-elves, right? So when I marry a human man… D-don’t make me say any more than that!!”

Oh, I see.

That would indeed require a much larger invasion plan than my vampire older sister or zombie younger sister. Of course, elves had long lives, so if they continued creating half-elves and quarter-

elves, they might be able to fill up a decent percentage of the population eventually.

…In fact, did that mean there were Archenemies that couldn't have kids with humans?

"I don't know. Are you willing to test it out with the gargoyles that are moving statues or the one-horned unicorns?"

"…"

Archenemy certainly was a broad category.

"But that's just how it is," readily said the longbow-wielding dark elf. "You've drawn the line there, but other people draw the line sooner than that. Some will reject a mermaid or fairy right away. Everyone has 'that emotion' somewhere."

…Did that mean the Bright Cross that ran the Colosseum and the frenzied gallery did not have defective minds? Was that something everyone had? Was it something that existed in my own heart?

I had trouble accepting that.

And it must have shown on my face.

Muramatsu Yukie giggled and added more.

"Although it seems you've drawn the line way, way back. So far back that it's hard tell where the line is."

"Right."

For some reason, Itou Helen nodded in agreement while holding her glass wand in both hands. It was a little hard to tell whether she was praising me or criticizing me.

Eventually, we arrived at our destination.

We had simply been walking on and on through the hemispherical tunnel, so there were no actual landmarks. There were occasional alphanumeric markers on the wall, but only the Bright Cross could tell what those meant.

It was Maxwell on my smartphone that told us.

“You have arrived within Public Kukyou 1st High School’s grounds. The high school is directly overhead.”

“So where do you think the giant supercomputer is on the grounds?”

“Sure. I doubt it is aboveground. I suspect there is a gym-sized space below the school.

…Probably so.

That was not going to make this easy. Did we have to rise to the surface and then search for another secret entrance? And when we were already underground now?

With that in mind, we climbed the stairs and I held my smartphone out to the thick round door. Several metal rods unlocked and it slowly opened outwards.

And just as that happened, I heard scraping metal and saw orange sparks.

By the time I realized we had been fired on from beyond the door, Muramatsu Yukie had grabbed my hand and dragged me back.

“Maxwell!”

“No. I was unable to predict the possibility of an attack at this

timing.”

“I wasn’t criticizing you. Can you close the door!?”

“No. The door can receive no further instructions until the entire opening process is complete.”

Intermittent bursts of orange sparks entered the tunnel.

We couldn’t let the gap widen any further. That would give them a wider angle with which to target us and it could easily allow them to enter the tunnel itself!!

“The gunshots are extremely quiet for the power of the gunfire. These are most likely the .45 subsonic heavy metal rounds I mentioned.”

“…”

I was thankful I had not set the phone to read Maxwell’s messages aloud.

“?”

Itou Helen curled up inside her cape and trembled like lightning had struck nearby, but she still gave me a puzzled look.

I couldn’t let her notice.

“Maxwell, do you think we can break through this door?”

“No. Given the frequency and precision of the gunfire, you would be fatally shot while passing through the door.”

“Then there’s no point in staying here. Maxwell, open all the doors within a 300m radius of the school!!”

“Warning: that increases the risk of allowing the Bright Cross in the tunnels, so it will eliminate the safety of the entire underground space.”

“We’re ending this tonight either way. If we can’t destroy their simulator, our situation is only going to get worse. Just do it, Maxwell. There’s only the 1 sniper. If we open 10 or even 100 exits, they won’t be able to cover all of them!”

“Sure.”

Deep metallic sounds reverberated from all over the dark underground space.

We turned our back on the dangerous exit that allowed bullets in, took a detour through the spider web of tunnels, and made our way to another opened exit.

Once outside, I found we were on the edge of the schoolyard. The trash area and fire hydrant were located there, so I hadn’t really checked on it before, but the exits near my school were apparently not buried underground. It may have been like a portion of the subway that came aboveground.

We were surrounded by silent darkness.

There were no lights on at the school. The nocturnal group which included my older sister must not have arrived yet. I had lost track of time while underground, but the clock on the school building’s wall said it was just before 8 PM.

…In that case, I wanted to finish this within an hour, before my older sister and the others arrived.

Where was *he*?

I didn’t want to think his name. If I accidentally spoke it aloud, it

could easily cause Itou Helen to panic as she held onto my shirt.

He was her family.

Her big brother.

How had he ended up with the Bright Cross and why had he aimed a gun at his own little sister? I simply couldn't imagine it. I certainly couldn't do that. No matter the situation, I could never aim a deadly weapon at Erika or Ayumi in real life.

I could not understand him.

I knew this was no time to give up on thinking, but I felt on the verge of throwing in the towel. No other opponent could have been more frightening here. I couldn't predict what he would do next. Especially when he had the full support of a simulator more powerful than Maxwell.

Without an assurance of safety, the dark schoolyard was like a jungle minefield. I didn't know if the number of mines was 10 or 100, but stepping on just one would mean death. Could I really take the first step under those conditions? The dark shadows seemed to wrap around my feet and pin them to the ground.

"Maxwell, do you know where the sniper is?"

I quietly called to him, but he did not answer. The backlight did not activate and the screen was dead.

"Maxwell."

I spoke more loudly, but still no response. My hair stood on end as I feared the device had malfunctioned at the worst possible time, but…

"It would be better not to activate the backlight in this darkness,"

said the dark elf. “He’s saving your life here.”

That made sense.

But wait. The sniper couldn’t produce any light either. Then how was *he* receiving support from their simulator?

“Itou-san.”

“?”

“It can be methane gas or whatever else, but can you give yourself an animal’s ability to produce flammable gas? Muramatsu-san and I will search for something to use as a smokescreen.”

“What are you…going to do?”

“A sniper can’t do their job if they can’t see where we are. And yet this one can fire just fine even in the dark night or a smokescreen. That’s because *he*’s predicting his target’s location with a simulator.”

“Then there’s nothing we can do.”

“But how is he getting that data? He can’t read it if he’s in an environment that doesn’t allow him to activate his smartphone’s backlight. In that case, sound is the most likely option. He might have an earpiece that provides support with a synthetic voice.”

Muramatsu Yukie’s second had seemed focused on an earpiece he wasn’t used to.

“First, Muramatsu-san and I will set up a smokescreen. That will force *him* to focus on the simulator’s voice. Then you detonate the flammable gas to surround *him*…no, the entire school with explosive noise. Once *he* can’t hear the voice from his earpiece, the sniper can’t get through the smokescreen or the darkness. That

gives us a chance to turn this around.”

Part 4

We got to work.

Living things could create methane. For example, humans could just by eating potatoes. There was also the fermentation of anaerobic bacteria and the synthesis of formic acid.

Formic acid was the toxin and source of pain found in a wasp's stinger or an ant's fangs. And with all her colorful potions, Itou Helen could easily use the structure of a venomous insect. Using that slightly differently would allow her to create a gas bomb.

A deafening explosive blast shook all the glass in the school.

"Now!"

Muramatsu Yukie and I used her quick charger's electrode and a metal clip to start a fire. Lighting the grass clippings stuffed in a burnable trash bag started an incomplete combustion.

We threw a few fireball trash bags into the schoolyard and let the wind spread out the black smokescreen while the dark elf and I ran. We ran separately. Without the simulator's support and with the double punch of the darkness and smokescreen, *he* could not target us properly. But a random shot through the dark smoke would still be fatal if it hit us. We couldn't complain no matter how we were hit. So including Itou Helen, all 3 of us approached the reinforced concrete school building from different angles before *he* could recover from his confusion.

"Maxwell!"

“Sure. Move 15m north-northeast. It would be quickest to break through the 1st-floor classroom window.”

It didn’t work out as cool as in a movie. It probably looked like I was completely sprawled out as I dove into the window.

I heard a high-pitched shattering sound.

And my jump wasn’t quite high enough, so my toes caught on the window frame and I tripped quite spectacularly. I only stopped after getting caught in several desks and chairs.

Itou Helen and Muramatsu Yukie arrived safely inside a step behind me.

This wasn’t the time to groan about the pain filling my body. There was also no sign of the security system activating despite the broken window.

“Was that you, Maxwell?”

“No. Someone else shut off the sensors. Analyzing route…”

The Bright Cross, huh?

Since they had gone out of their way to eliminate the “power of numbers” provided by the adults, they must have really wanted to finish us off with the sniper rifle. And the Bright Cross both despised and feared Archenemies. A dark elf like Muramatsu Yukie was one thing, but a witch like Itou Helen could mass-produce monsters by sprinkling her potions on humans. Did they think going with quantity over quality would only give the Archenemies more power to work with?

I glanced down at my smartphone as I spoke.

“*He*’s more skilled than us. There’s a stairway on either end of the

building, so let's surround him. I doubt he can use his sniper rifle properly indoors, but make sure he never has a direct shot at you, Muramatsu-san. You use electricity, so if you find a way to bend the current's path in a right angle or crank-shape, you should be able to unilaterally attack him. Think of ways to send your conductive materials through the air other than your bow. Itou-san…oh, I know. You use a turtle shell or something to create a large shield as you advance."

After giving them those instructions, I watched the 2 girls head for the different staircases.

"No. I have not provided that support information."

"That's fine."

How could I show them this?

I grabbed a nearby chair and threw it toward the teacher's desk.

With a loud collision, a large object rolled out from the back.

That was likely Itou Tamago.

He had probably noticed us entering the room he had been in and was waiting for us to leave.

Even if it was full-auto, a sniper rifle was a poor choice for a close-range battle against a group.

Or had he not wanted his little sister to see his face?

"!"

The man in a black night combat outfit immediately raised a thick firearm that looked like a combination of a rifle and a handgun.

But I gave a shout before he could pull the trigger.

“Maxweeee

“Ghhh!?”

With a lightning-like flash, Itou Tamago’s groan accelerated. Meanwhile, I grabbed the sniper rifle’s long barrel and pushed it to the side like a lever to switch train tracks.

And his index finger was still inside the loop of the trigger guard.

His wrist was made into the axis of rotation which could not have been pleasant. This time, he uttered a short scream and let go of the grip.

I had stolen the gun, but I wasn’t about to mimic him and try to use it myself. Even with Maxwell’s support, I’d probably just shoot myself in the thigh. So still sitting on top of him, I grabbed the opposite end of the weapon and swung it down like a club. With the force of driving a hoe into the dirt, I slammed the upside-down sniper rifle’s stock into Itou Tamago’s face again and again.

I glared down at the man who futilely tried to guard his face with his hands.

My throat shook with a cold voice that frightened even me.

“…Why?”

With the weapon raised, I felt the weight of the sniper rifle in my wrists.

“Why did you force this onto Itou Helen!? Is the Bright Cross that important to you!? Aren’t you…aren’t you her big brother!?”

I just couldn’t understand it.

If Ayumi’s life was targeted by the Bright Cross, if she was shoved in front of the TV cameras, and if everyone in the world jeered and booed at her, I might think about standing up for my little sister’s

sake, but I would never think of siding with the Bright Cross. That line of thinking simply made no sense whatsoever.

“…I didn’t know.”

I heard a scratchy voice.

“The stage was full of smoke and I didn’t know who was in there. I was only following Laplace’s instructions. So…”

Once I realized how pathetic an excuse he was making, all hesitation vanished from my mind.

I seriously swung down the upside-down sniper rifle like I was trying to smash that arrogant nose.

I heard a soft sound and felt a raw sensation in my wrists.

“Everyone knew the 3rd round was between Itou Helen and Muramatsu Yukie!! The announcements, the electronic screens, the odds tables, and the banners and fans made by those strange, so-called fans! You expect me to believe you didn’t see or hear any of that!? Yeah, right!!”

“Ah…gah…”

“And what about this time? Who were you told to wait for as you hid in this school at night? Did Itou Helen’s name really never come up? If not…why did you decide she was an enemy and aim your gun at her when she came running up!? She’s a 1st year here, so it would be perfectly normal for her to come here at night to grab something she forgot at school!!”

If he wasn’t proud of his actions, why did he obey his instructions? Had he really sold his family’s soul for something he couldn’t even come up with a good excuse for? Did he have any idea what he was weighing on the scales!?

“…Shut…up!!”

“Kh.”

When I swung the sniper rifle down again, he grabbed the stock with one hand. And he pulled it toward him. I lost my balance and he raised his hips to build up momentum.

We flipped over.

I at least managed to deflect his wrist so he couldn’t take the sniper rifle from me. I was now on my back and Itou Tamago was on top of me giving a regretful look toward the mass of metal sliding along the floor, but he quickly rethought that. He instead reached toward his back.

And with the unpleasant sound of something slipping out of a sheath, a knife with a blade longer than a 30cm ruler reflected the moonlight.

“I!”

“Gh…!!”

I even threw aside my smartphone now. I used both hands to desperately hold back his wrist instead of the blade itself. But he had the advantage since he could put his body weight behind it. Little by little the tip of the blade approached the center of my chest.

But I oddly didn’t feel like I was losing.

Maybe that was because his sweaty face only spewed complaints.

“I didn’t want to do it! I just about fainted when I saw her name on the document! Besides, I’d hidden it all until now. No one in my family knew about the secret side of the Bright Cross! And yet…why

did this have to happen!? There's no way I can course correct now that I'm surrounded by all those lunatics! Anyone who goes against 'policy' ends up disposed of in the ocean or mountains. I had no choice! No one can fight it! So!!"

…So you aren't at fault?

He was basically saying the same thing as someone whose group of friends started bullying people and then ended up choosing his own little sister as a target. Sure it would be painful and sure you wouldn't want to defy the leader kid.

But.

When faced with his crying family member, he laughed and clung to the fact that the leader said he would be forgiven if he hit her too. Except he was using a deadly weapon instead of just his fists!

This is the worst! Everything about it is!!

You are! And so is the environment around you!!

"…Fight back."

The blade tip was now less than a centimeter from my heart.

But I didn't look away. I glared at this person who was undeniably "human", but was absolutely unforgivable because of that.

"It doesn't matter how long you agonize over it. You can hold her knees in her arms, hesitate to take that final step, tremble in fear, and flail around all you want. But you have to fight back in the end! You could have made up for everything if you'd done that. You could have become the kind of 'human' that everyone hopes to be! But…but you're just part of the Bright Cross through and through! You're just a monster!!"

“…!! What do you…understand…!?”

“I’m fighting back. These aren’t just words. I’m risking my life right now to save Itou Helen! That’s the entire reason you and the rest of the Bright Cross are trying to kill me!!”

“Kh.”

Don’t let that shut you up.

This is the privilege you should have announced to this cold world.

Why is it me?

It’s because you couldn’t be her “Onii-chan”, Itou Tamago!

“She’s held it inside this whole time. When I first met her, she kept talking about her ‘Onii-chan’, but she hasn’t said a word of it ever since getting caught in the Colosseum. Because she didn’t want to get her family involved! She didn’t want to even mention your name in this abnormal world!! And yet you smugly abandoned her. You just resigned yourself to this cold world and rejected even the possibility that Itou Helen is fighting on her own!! How can I forgive you for that? How can a bastard like that call himself her big brother!? If you want that title, then protect your family!! Become the kind of human who stands as a shield in front of her even if it means making an enemy of the entire world, you cowardly piece of shit!!”

My wrists had gone numb as they held back the knife. I felt like the muscles were going to separate from the bone. I couldn’t think of any way to turn this around.

“Are you telling me to go out in a blaze of glory? Don’t act ignorant. You know how hard it is to fight the Bright Cross on your own!”

“Then work with me.”

But this alone I had an immediate response for.

We weren't talking about a video game or a simulation. This was reality, a harsh world where a single mistake meant death. But that was the entire point. When you only had one life and no redos, there were some things you simply couldn't compromise on.

"If you can say you're the kind of 'human' who would risk your life and fight the Bright Cross for your little sister, then I won't abandon you either. So you aren't alone! There can be more than one person in the world wishing for Itou Helen's survival!!"

"Kh."

For just a moment, it looked like the madman's face really did twist around.

But then he pushed down with his body weight even more. As if he had shaken free of his doubt.

Was it over? What had I lacked? Why hadn't I gotten through to him? I thought we might be able to understand each other since we both had troublesome little sisters. Did the giant framework of the Bright Cross really distort your humanity this much?

The tip of the large knife pierced my clothing and stabbed shallowly into my skin. If he continued to push down with his body weight, he would break my breastbone like he was stepping on it with high heels and then pierce my heart.

Yes, I just about gave up.

But in that very moment, a metallic vibration rang out.

While he straddled me, Itou Tamago's head wobbled and then he collapsed to the side.

Then I saw the dark elf standing behind him after swinging the snipe rifle like it was a metal baseball bat.

Muramatsu Yukie wiggled her long ears and spoke with clear exasperation in her voice.

“You’re making too much noise.”

“…Oh, dammit.”

“Only that girl would obediently continue up the stairs with this kind of racket going on down here. It was difficult finding a chance to enter the classroom when he had a sniper rifle, though.”

She tossed aside the sniper unit and reached a hand out toward me.

I grabbed her hand and she helped me up while adding more.

“This just goes to show how much Itou Helen trusts you. Although it can be hard to tell because she’s quiet and tends not to speak up on her own. You just about gave up at the end there, didn’t you? Don’t you dare get yourself killed and betray that trust.”

…*I can’t believe this.*

I couldn’t speak ill of Itou Tamago like this. I had promised to fight alongside her, so I would be betraying her if I didn’t struggle to the very last moment.

I looked back down at the man lying unmoving on the floor. He could have been the one by Itou Helen’s side instead of me. No, he was the one that *should* have been there. This was all that remained of what had once been a big brother.

“Help me tie him up.”

“Sure.”

The division between them was clear

We tied up our *enemy* and hurried back to our *ally*.

We returned to the girl named Itou Helen.

Part 5

Laplace.

I spoke that word after meeting up with Itou Helen in her witch hat and cape in the school building.

The blonde witch in a black dress tilted her head like a small bird.

“Senpai?”

“Oh. The sniper mentioned it. Laplace. That seems to be the name of the Bright Cross’s simulator.”

They probably took the name from Laplace’s Demon. It was the perfect name for a computer or simulator. There were probably tons of supercomputers with the same name around the world. Just like you could find people named Tanaka or Yamada everywhere. I had honestly thought it was too cliché and named mine after Maxwell’s Demon instead.

If this Laplace surpassed Maxwell in scope, I could only imagine it was larger than a school gym. The Bright Cross was an international organization with near-endless supplies of money, but something about it bothered me.

“…Why choose this school?”

Yes. It would make sense if it was an engineering college with a strong focus on computing. Or if it was a defense academy that restricted who could enter the campus.

But this was a normal high school. Even if they could use plenty of

electricity and the cooling pool water, it didn't seem that special.

"Perhaps they intentionally chose a normal facility with little relation to themselves?" suggested Maxwell. "To deceive thieves when transporting valuable artwork or antiques, noticeable security is intentionally avoided."

"The Bright Cross managed to build that giant underground space below the entire city, but you think they struggled to hide a single supercomputer? That would be like adding just one more large room for them."

Besides, I wasn't one to talk, but the students at my school weren't exactly good at keeping secrets. It was like we were forced into a tiny, stifling box and were starving for any new information that would get our faces above the muddy water. So while a gag order or NDA might work with adults, it was almost meaningless with us. Word would spread like wildfire with nothing but "this is just between us" tacked onto the front.

Would they really want to place a large computer that could cause a scandal in such a dangerous location? Not matter what it was, if there was a secret facility constantly using lots of power and water which didn't show up on the official school plans, they would receive a flood of criticism for wasting taxpayer money.

If even one of the hundreds of students attending the school noticed, there would be no stopping the spread of information.

"There might be more to this." I wasn't celebrating it, but those words naturally escaped my lips. "It isn't just for camouflage. They might have some other reason for choosing this school for Laplace."

Now, then.

If part of the administration was helping and thus creating a connection between the school and Laplace, they would have a terminal for monitoring and controlling it. They would need to adjust the values and increase efficiency if the cooling was not working well.

They could always control it remotely via fiber optic cable, but resolving problems often required you to work with both the software and hardware. They would want an engineer near the supercomputer in case it overheated or was hit by a power surge.

Which meant…

“Um, Senpai? Wouldn’t anywhere connected to the school network be most suspicious?”

Itou Helen didn’t seem to quite understand as she peered at the smartphone screen from below her witch hat, but she still made that hesitant suggestion.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure. All of the school’s students have their grades and physical measurement data stored and shared in a database on the school intranet. That means the faculty room and infirmary are the core. In addition to projectors controlled by tablets, there are electronic book devices available for the students to test out in the classrooms, so a wireless LAN environment is maintained. There are also POS terminals at the cafeteria and school shop registers, security sensors and cameras, and other sensors in the bathrooms and locker rooms, so almost the entire facility has a functional internet environment. It would be easier to list the places where the internet cannot be used.”

“Eh? …The bathrooms too?”

The caped blonde girl covered her mouth with a hand in surprise.

And I sighed.

“These days, they have sensors that automatically detect and notify the plumbing company if there’s a clog in the pipes. And if someone stays in a stall for too long, a sensor will trigger an alarm in the security room. It’s officially to check on anyone who might have collapsed in the stall, but I hear it’s actually to prevent anyone from setting up hidden cameras.”

“Uehhh…”

The black dress witch didn’t seem to know how to respond.

Well, I understood it wasn’t a pleasant topic. The sensors were like the infrared ones for automatic doors, so it wasn’t like they could record a clear image like with a camera. But it was only human to not exactly celebrate it. You didn’t want machines watching over you quite to *that* extent.

Then the dark elf stood up and she spoke with exasperation in her voice.

“If you’re done showing off what trivia you know, does that mean we have no hint? It will take time to investigate each and every classroom in such a large school.”

“I’ll have this settled before my sister’s group or the management shows up. Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“In that case, tell me where the wireless signal doesn’t reach. Or to put it another way, the areas that are shielded well enough to keep any outside signals from getting in.”

“Sending a test signal and detecting reaction…”

Maxwell fell silent for a moment.

“Complete. A location was found in the library on the old building’s 3rd floor.”

“And there you have it. Let’s go check it out.”

“Eh? Eh?”

Itou Helen sounded confused as she held her glass wand in both hands. Muramatsu Yukie brushed her long silver hair back with a hand and interrupted with a bit of irritation in her voice.

“Is it really there? I feel like a major secret would more likely be in the principal’s office, the board chairman’s office, or somewhere else close to the bigshots.”

“Those important people are exactly the ones that don’t want any possible scandals anywhere near them.”

“But they’re the leaders of this school, aren’t they? If anything is found on the school grounds, won’t responsibility fall to them?”

I also found Maxwell’s answer surprising, but I wasn’t about to doubt him. And when I thought about it again, it made sense.

“Even if that happens and even if it’s terribly unnatural, they’ll find a way to cut it away like a lizard’s tail. According to the Class Rep, the library was sponsored by the vice principal and a lot of the books were donated by him.”

That meant the others had set things up so the vice principal would take all the blame if anything came to light. I kind of felt bad for him. I just couldn’t hate someone who loved reading books called Our Princess Went Delinquent and Became a Dark Elf or As a

Master Strategist, I'm Unmatched in this Fantasy World.

"And on the topic of digitization, managing the checked-out books would normally be the very first thing. If there's no sign of that, then it really is suspicious."

With that, we visited the library first.

In her witch hat and black dress, Itou Helen tilted her head like a little bird.

"Um, what do we do about the lock?"

"Maxwell."

"Sure. For better or for worse, the school's security has currently been shut off by the Bright Cross."

"Meaning?"

"Nothing you do will be reported. And any traces you leave can be blamed on the Bright Cross."

A loud sound soon followed.

It was the sound of me kicking down the library's locked sliding door.

"You two really make a good team," sighed Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf as she aimed her longbow into the darkness while I walked right on in.

I could see the many bookcases in the darkness, but I ignored them and focused on the flat-screen computer on the reception counter.

"Maxwell, is that it?"

“No. The shielded region is through the door behind the counter. That is likely the archive used to manage donated books.”

We didn’t have the key, so I kicked down that door as well.

An archive.

It was about the size of a large classroom. All 4 walls were covered with bookcases, but the type of books contained there were mixed together and they were clearly only being stored there temporarily. There was a work desk in the center that contained glue, needles, and thread. There was also a small bottle of ethanol, absorbent cotton, cotton swabs, and more. There was even a paint set.

I see.

The donated books would be gathered here to have their damage and stains repaired before they were placed in the library proper.

From the looks of things, I could tell it was definitely sponsored by a dedicated individual. That probably helped it play its role as camouflage and a lizard’s tail, but the vice principal’s love of books was not a lie. He wouldn’t go to this extent otherwise.

But that wasn’t the main point now.

“Maxwell, I don’t see anything like a computer. Where do you think it’s hidden?”

“Sure. Simulating individual movement patterns based on the room’s layout…complete. The paint set on the work desk. It likely has a false bottom.”

I followed his instructions and discovered a thin tablet computer.

I switched it on and had Maxwell get past the password lock. I checked inside and found it was completely empty. It didn’t even

have the bare minimum of preset apps. Instead, it had a few unfamiliar icons.

“There are a few documents related to supercomputers: photos, texts, and designs. Is this spreadsheet related to the financial costs?”

“Isn’t this a good discovery?” asked the dark elf. “What is that bitter look for?”

It was too obvious. I had to wonder if the vice principal was even aware of the room’s shielding or the false bottom in the paint set. Although the analysis of the room was likely correct that he cared for the paint set.

Most likely, these secret documents had been intentionally placed here to blame the vice principal if anything happened. It was as fishy as the “secretary’s memo” ordering the transfer of money when a politician’s corruption came to light. I was really starting to feel bad for the vice principal now.

But if they were trying to blame him, the contents had to be real. They might be restricted so blame couldn’t make its way back to the true culprit, but this should be enough to get a general idea.

Why was the largescale computer even in our school?

The answer was given there.

Part 6

This matter is somewhat unrelated to the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation's true desire to conquer all disasters, but we have determined it will help prevent manmade disasters and we will commit personnel, funding, technology, and information management to this task.

We have a strong connection to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, so keep in mind that we are making a show of good faith in leaving Laplace with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology.

This machine will prevent human errors. You could also say it will divide up personnel.

National standardized testing, IQ tests, student reports, athletic tests, and other qualifications… We have so many methods of measuring a student, but there is no single determining factor.

Laplace will gather this varied information on a national basis and divide them up on a logical basis to accurately predict which students have potential for future growth. From the government offices to the many corporations, they will be placed in the appropriate genre and ranked.

This will prevent talent from never seeing the light of day and rotting there. It will also prevent incompetence from passing itself off as talent and taking up a position in a major corporation.

Appropriately dividing up personnel will directly lead to the stabilization of the nation's economy. That will in turn prevent unpredictable crimes.

It is useless to pretend that unneeded personnel are necessary and betting on their success. And it is equally useless to oppress necessary personnel as unneeded.

Laplace will perfectly predict human potential.

And this prediction will reach every last educational institution in the nation. The digitization of grades, student reports, physical measurements, and other data is already complete, so the hiring corporation must only enter the type of person they need into a search engine.

This will spell the end of the worthless employment testing and interviewing process and the inefficient recruitment process where both sides attempted to deceive the other. And the concept of unclear intermediaries and connections will die out.

The age is coming in which you can find a list of the exact personnel you want at the click of a button.

Most manmade disasters – that is, serious criminal actions – are the result of erroneous evaluation of personnel.

When useful personnel is not recognized by the world or incompetent personnel mistakenly sees themselves as geniuses, that discrepancy between their self-evaluation and other people's evaluation produces various negative emotions which lead to actual harmful actions.

Laplace will correct all of that.

The useful will be placed in the useful box and the incompetent will be placed in the incompetent box. Everything will be examined and people will be placed on the appropriate course for their life. If you live a life based on the proper evaluation, those errors and discrepancies will not occur and everyone will live the lives they

were meant for. That is the best way of avoiding manmade disasters.

We will conquer all disasters.

Disasters caused by human hands are no exception.

Part 7

“What…is this?”

My throat grew dry.

I mean…what was this?

Did it mean your entire life would be decided for you before you were even tested in the center exams or employment interviews!?

Or more bluntly, it was a national level blacklist.

Anyone listed there could never advance in school or find employment. It would look like they were given an equal shot at it, but in reality, the answer had been decided before they even faced the test. Even if they scored a perfect 500 in all 5 subjects, they were doomed to fail. And if someone was predicted to pass, they could hand in a blank sheet of paper and casually walk on through.

If this was working as described, it was still a major problem.

…But there was no guarantee that *the* Bright Cross would use it properly. What if they decided they didn’t like me because I was opposing them, so they decided to mess with Amatsu Satori’s parameters a little and reregistered me into the failing group? I would be doomed to an unemployed life where I was rejected even from interviews for part-time jobs at convenience stores or gas stations.

Not to mention the Archenemies that the Bright Cross so hated. No matter how many late nights of hard work Erika or Ayumi put in, the Bright Cross would simply laugh. They could ignore it all, give

them the “failure” stamp, and rob them of their dreams. The Bright Cross didn’t like it, they didn’t care, and they thought monsters should crawl around like monsters. They could easily validate all of those malicious words!

I felt like I finally understood how the ridiculous Bright Cross was so solidly rooted in the underside of society.

All of the successful people like elite bureaucrats and young corporate executives had been helped out by Laplace. The coconspirators of these national-level backdoor admissions were covering it up at the highest levels of the government. They had gained so much power by accumulating money and playing nice and they were letting the schools and corporations they liked make reservations for renting out that power in the future.

I could see why the Bright Cross needed this.

There were far too many people who would be in trouble if the Bright Cross’s evil deeds came to light. In all seriousness, this scandal contained the destructive power to break the very framework of Japan as a nation and throw is into a great depression.

Even if the Bright Cross didn’t do anything directly, the people around us could easily silence us for them.

“So this is why they left the supercomputer at a school. They’re using this to rank every student in Japan and then ‘shipping them out’ at the click of a button.”

They were preventing manmade disasters.

On its face, the phrase looked nice enough. But this was definitely not a way to create a peaceful world free of strife. It only robbed the oppressed of any chance to resist. In fact, it gave all fortune to

those who supported the Bright Cross, left any who resisted with no lives to live, and filled the top of the financial world with the people they wanted.

How long had Laplace been in place?

I doubted it had been there since the gray-haired old men had been students. But in that case, they would all be replaced eventually. There would be a turning point when the cowards helped by Laplace usurped all the top seats. That felt like the year when sensibility would die.

It was so ridiculous that I felt dizzy.

But it was definitely on the crazy scale of *the* Bright Cross which had remade the entire space below the city into a giant kidnapping facility and worked to efficiently reduce the number of Archenemies by having them kill each other.

…That diabolical system could not be allowed to exist.

This wasn't just a simulator more powerful than Maxwell. It had far greater meaning and was a far greater evil.

The tablet contained a few diagrams.

They included Laplace's location and the maintenance entrance.

Once I saw that, I spoke to the witch and dark elf.

"I'm sick of this. Let's end it as soon as possible."

Part 8

The entrance to Laplace, the personnel dividing simulator that the Bright Cross had placed in Kukyou City, was behind the outdoor pool.

At first glance, it looked like a drink vending machine next to the pool's largest wall.

But when I held up my smartphone and had Maxwell decode it, the entire vending machine opened up like a giant refrigerator door.

And there was no refrigeration equipment or drink cans inside.

Only a hole leading into a dark, dark subterranean space.

"That's a stairway, isn't it?"

Muramatsu Yukie sounded confused as her long ears twitched.

In her cape and black dress, Itou Helen held the back of my shirt with her small hand.

Even I knew this was not going to lead anywhere good. But that was what it meant to approach the truth of the Bright Cross. We were doing the right thing in divulging these secrets, but it seemed to wear away my soul. That was the kind of evil they held.

But there was an end to that evil.

We would end it.

If we didn't lose sight of that, we could fight. If we didn't turn away because it was hard to look at, we could face it head-on. We had to

do that. They claimed this was “for the world” or “for the human race” or something like that, but it was definitely wrong to place a preset cap on Erika and Ayumi’s lives and happiness when they were working so hard.

Possibility should be equal for everyone.

Even if people temporarily came into conflict, that wasn’t a disaster. It was the competition and rivalry needed to reach even greater heights.

The optimum answer given by the Bright Cross would only make them happy. And there were no new possibilities there. A pleasant world void of competition and rivalry was a world that would gradually decline and shrivel up. The preexisting values would simply be reprinted and anyone who diverged from that standard even slightly would be rejected. It was a dull, happy world where everyone would slowly be worn away and decline. If we didn’t destroy that, humankind was done for.

We walked down the stairs into that dark, dark space. We walked into the abyss. And with each step, the thick darkness and great pressure of the Bright Cross seemed to wrap around us all the more.

How far down was it?

We barely spoke and it grew hard to tell how much time had passed.

But we finally reached the end.

We were in the depths of the earth.

We had arrived at the infernal palace where the demon named Laplace slept.

At the bottom of the long, long stairway, we were faced with a giant door. It was a double door and there was a clean room after it to keep any unnecessary dust, dirt, or germs from getting in.

That meant nothing to us since we were here to destroy it.

We ignored the cleaning procedure and opened the next door too.

“Kh…!?”

The oddly inorganic white light of LED lightbulbs stabbed at our retinas since our eyes were adjusted to the darkness. I forced down the sharp pain that ran between my temples from right to left and I half-violently kept my closing eyelids open.

It was an unbelievably large space.

It was about 3 stories tall. More than a large pool or school gym, it seemed to cover the entire schoolyard.

And countless gravestones towered up across that entire space.

They were colored black.

They were 2 meters long, 5 meters wide, and tall enough to just barely fit below the ceiling. I could not quite call them stone pillars, obelisks, or monoliths, but those solid objects towered up at even intervals. There had to be more than 200 of them in all.

This was Laplace.

This was the grave of humankind’s possibilities.

It was the ultimate simulator that easily surpassed my Maxwell. Just one of the gravestones probably had greater specs than container-sized Maxwell. And they had hundreds of them hooked together in parallel for vast processing power and flexible logical

thoughts.

It made sense that it could overpower Maxwell.

I had expected a national project level of supercomputer, but I was still overwhelmed by the scale of the enemy. I was stuck at the individual level where I filled a metal container with new handheld game systems sold cheaply due to defective parts and hooked them up in parallel, so this level of equipment funding was on another level entirely.

It was like the difference between a housewife's new idea for a dish and a 3-star French restaurant. My entire body felt the great sense of defeat from the difference in power and difference between professional and amateur.

But.

Even so.

I ultimately didn't break because I did have one thing I was confident in.

…Laplace. I haven't used my computer for anything as evil as you. No matter how great your specs, that will never change.

"Hm, hm, hm, hm, hmm☆"

At that very moment, I heard a female voice with a mixture of adorable and seductive that sounded like someone rolling a piece of hard candy around in their mouth, like the ringing a small bell, and yet like it was mocking me.

From where?

Yes, *she* always looked down on us from above. Just like she preferred to stand on the top of those clear, die-shaped bug cages.

A blue form was sitting at the top of one of the many giant gravestones.

“…The bunny girl.”

“C’mon, we know each other better than that. Call me Karen-chan.”

Had she expected Sniper Itou Tamago to lose? Had Laplace predicted all of our desperate efforts and informed her in advance?

When we were the ones being manipulated, I suppose it didn’t matter how many calculations we performed.

“Listen up.”

I opened my mouth as if accepting the challenge. I didn’t care if I was merely relying on others. If I could gain any kind of advantage over that blue “monster” that shined like a tropical butterfly, I would use every weapon I had.

“Your insane Colosseum system doesn’t apply here. You might have your precious Laplace, but does the winning route determined by its perfect predictions work on the level of physical bodies? I have two Archenemies and Simulator Maxwell with me. Even if none of us is perfect, you might not be able to handle all of us if we go after you together.”

When I said that, the witch and dark elf by my sides adjusted their grips on their glass wand and longbow.

No matter how overwhelming and merciless the Bright Cross was, they used their superior numbers. No matter how much influence they had on human society, the individuals didn’t have superhuman powers.

And yet.

Sitting on the edge of the giant gravestone rising close to the ceiling, the blue bunny girl giggled as she slowly held her arms around a knee wrapped in black tights.

She was still confident enough to laugh.

“I could say the same to you.”

“…What?”

“Mr. Second. You seem to be under the mistaken impression that only you have *that power*.”

As soon as she said that, *it* arrived.

A great tremor shook this space which was larger than the entire schoolyard.

My thoughts ground to a halt.

Itou Helen and Muramatsu Yukie had stood by my sides, but the witch and dark elf were targeted first. By what, you ask? I didn’t know. I hadn’t seen it at all. I only saw the result: I felt the frightening shaking of whatever-it-was hitting and I saw dust rising like cotton candy in the computer storage room that should have kept all dust out.

“Cough! Itou-san? Muramatsu-san!? Cough, cough cough!!”

I couldn’t even see a meter in front of me.

But I still noticed some of what had changed. As pathetic as it might be, I was only a high school boy, so those 2 Archenemies were my absolute trump cards.

But they had entirely vanished.

I felt an overwhelming sense of silence, like I had been left alone in a hospital late at night. It was the hopeless feeling of having nothing left to rely on.

And.

And.

And.

“Just a moment.”

The blue bunny girl jumped down right in front of me. She did so far too easily. It was as light an action as heading out to the neighborhood convenience store. She landed as gently as a feather.

But wait.

This space was 3 stories tall. Those computers lining the room like gravestones just about hit the ceiling. And a flesh-and-blood human had casually jumped down from the top?

Plus, the blue bunny girl was wearing sexy stilettos. A jump from only two or three steps up should have been enough to twist her ankle.

Was this the power of the Bright Cross?

Was this the ultimate form of a human, allowing them to fight Archenemies head on?

No.

No, wait. It can’t be…!

“Oh, dear. I suppose that would be enough to clue you in.”

The blue bunny sounded like she was enjoying herself as she gave me a look of intense scorn. And the strange phenomena were still underway.

At some point, a pure gold cross-spear decorated with swan-like wings and a round one-handed shield had appeared in her beautifully manicured hands. The hips of her bunny costume now had a cloth fluttering around them like a long skirt with the front kept wide open. And the bunny ears adorning her long, radiant blue hair had been joined by large bird wings in the same position as two pens held behind someone's ears.

"Good evening once more."

It looked like something out of an RPG.

Her silhouette was feminine but clearly meant for battle.

"I am one of the rare Archenemies who belong to Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation. You can call me Karen-chan the Valkyrie☆ …I will now provide divine punishment to an insolent human and some impure monsters, so prepare yourself."

[Search Engine] An Expert Opinion [Absolute NOAH]

Valkyries hold an odd position at the top of the ranks even among the many Archenemies.

They appear in Norse mythology as divine messengers, but their position is different from that of definite goddesses.

Valkyries are courageous warrior women who wield tremendous power as part of the gods, but they also descend to the lower world as human women and marry ordinary men. The Valkyries' role is to find the souls of excellent warriors and recruit them to the heavenly army of the Einherjar, but their marriages are not a part of that. Their half-Valkyrie children *just so happen* to have excellent potential as warriors, but it is love that binds the two of them together.

For that reason, Valkyries will spend long periods of time in the lower world as human wives, but when the gods need them, they will instantly return to the front lines of the divine battles as warrior woman once more. So they do not hesitate to abandon their human households. They return to the heavenly world of Asgard and fulfill their jobs as divine messengers.

In other words, they can freely move between the two worlds of humans and Archenemies.

The true nature of the Valkyries is unclear.

Are they divine messengers or human wives?

The way those greatly different positions coexist without

contradiction seems to be what makes them Valkyries.

Now, I would like to make a fantastical comment here.

It is possible that the person you see next to you in your ordinary and boring household is actually a divine messenger.

After all, there is no way to distinguish human from Valkyrie while they are living as human wives. They use their truly perfect accuracy to play the role of excellent wives and mothers while fooling all of human society.

Chapter 8

Part 1

An exceptional Archenemy working for the Bright Cross.

Valkyrie Karen.

“…! Maxwell!!”

“Too. Late.”

The blue bunny girl slowly pulled something from the cleavage of her ample chest. It looked like a pair of sporty glasses with blue frames. When I realized they were smart glasses that placed their screen over the actual scenery, I felt a tremendous chill run down my spine.

The Valkyrie had linked with Laplace, the frightening simulator that far surpassed Maxwell. That extraordinary monster had now acquired a crystallization of humankind’s knowledge.

“Ah.”

I knew prediction was hopeless.

I understood that resistance was futile.

Time slowed to a crawl. It was like stepping out onto the road in front of my home and finding a giant dump truck’s bumper filling my vision. As my life flashed before my eyes, I gained an oddly calm certainty: this blue bunny girl monster was as certain a death as that.

While time moved strangely slowly, Valkyrie Karen used exceedingly accurate movements to raise her golden feathered

cross-spear while her long skirt fluttered behind her.

The relative density of pure gold was more than twice that of iron. That spear was as tall as she was, so if she threw it like a baseball, well, my life was over. I wouldn't just be bisected when it hit me; my flesh and blood would pop like a water balloon.

This was a threat on the same level as a dump truck bumper filling my vision.

Rolling to the right or left was only a theoretical solution. I didn't have the extraordinary strength of an Archenemy, so my body would not keep up with the thoughts in my head.

So this was the end.

All I could do was watch the mass of pure gold approaching my chest.

But I was not torn to pieces as if from a head-on collision with a dump truck.

The reason why was simple.

While I stood stock still, a witch and dark elf saved me from behind.

My slowed sense of time returned to normal.

So my senses were no longer enough to understand or grasp what had happened between them.

But escaping the desperate slowing of time did provide some relief.

Yes.

It meant I had escaped that threat to my life.

A moment later, a deafening clash of metal sounded. Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf had grabbed my shoulders, but that was not going to let me escape in time. The witch in a black dress, Itou Helen, rushed forward with odd, crab-like armor covering her, but when she was hit by Valkyrie Karen's fierce attack, which caused her long skirt to beat at the air behind her, Itou Helen was knocked back toward me like an artillery shell and I just barely managed to catch her.

I spread my arms to catch her, but she felt nothing like a soft girl.

It was more like a basketball had been dropped on my stomach while lying on Jupiter where the gravity was 11 times that of Earth. An unbearable impact shook not just my stomach but my entire spine. I was the one being protected here, but my breath was knocked from my lungs and I felt like my heart nearly stopped.

All three of us were sent flying.

Even so, the difference in power was so great that I could only feel we were fortunate none us had died.

"Max…well."

"Sure."

"What is a Valkyrie!? And how is this even possible!?"

It was true that vampires and zombies were extraordinary. If the great Darwin had seen them, they might have seemed so ridiculous that he would have thrown in the towel and never left his home again.

But Valkyries took a step beyond that. They weren't just monsters. They were divine messengers. That put them on the same level as Gabriel or Michael. If something like that showed up in a monster

championship full of orcs and skeletons, no one would be able to stop her from mopping the floor with the others. You would probably call it unfair!

“Now, now. This isn’t all that unusual.”

Instead of Maxwell, I received a response from Blue Bunny Girl Karen who easily rested the ultra-heavy gold cross-spear on her shoulder.

“While seeing a Valkyrie herself might be unusual, seeing derivations and their fallen forms is a different story. For example, banshees or the Wild Hunt. There are even plenty of theories saying European fairies have their roots in Valkyries.”

Did that mean this was acceptable?

Could this really be acceptable?

Could I really just accept that the Bright Cross had the help of an Archenemy that easily wielded a power on the ridiculous scale of “the gods”!?

“Sen…pai.”

From my arms…or rather, after having her witch hat head shoved into my gut after we were sent flying, Itou Helen gasped for breath but forced out some words.

“I will…deal with the monster. So you…give me instructions…just like-…”

“It’s no use.”

She was cut off by a whisper from the blue bunny girl wielding her gold spear and shield. Almost like she had predicted that statement.

And that may have been possible.

While she wiggled the round tail on her butt, she viewed us through those smart glasses…and those sporty, blue-framed glasses were a cutting-edge mobile device connected to the largescale personnel-selection simulator known as Laplace.

That blue demon smiled as if tearing open her own mouth.

“My Valkyrie power beats you as an Archenemy and Laplace’s simulator knowledge beats you as a human. Thus, there is no one at all who can defeat Karen-chan☆”

“…!!!???”

There was no room for rebuttal.

The blue bunny girl sensually licked her lips and then she exploded. No, that was just what it looked like. It did not matter that she wore stilettos. Her gold spear and shield turned to flowing lines of light as she approached and that divine messenger was right in front of us in no time.

Oh…no.

I’m going to…die!?

A moment later, two weapons crossed paths. One was the Valkyrie’s pure gold spear made ultra-heavy due to the relative density. The other was the group of translucent tails that were actually deadly jellyfish tentacles erupting from the back of the caped witch’s hips.

The result was plain as day.

“Ah…kweah!?”

The blonde girl screamed like a strangled bird and a single light touch severed all of the deadly jellyfish tentacles. It did not matter that it was 1-against-9. The difference in power was overwhelming. The gold-glittering spear actually sliced through the air after the tentacles were already moving. Her power was so much greater. In the time it took Itou Helen to move once while holding her glass wand, the blue bunny girl let her long skirt beat at the air behind her while she freely made 10 or even 20 fatal strikes from whatever angles she liked!

That deadly spear spun around in the blue bunny girl's neatly-manicured fingers. The deadly weapon danced about as casually as a cheerleader's baton.

The tip aimed for the center of my chest. In other words, my heart. That profaner of miracles even licked her lips as she directly targeted my life!?

"Kh!"

With a short breath, my body sank down. But it was not my own doing. In her sleeveless blouse and tight skirt, Muramatsu Yukie had swept my feet out from under me. I fell backwards and the golden spear just barely swept by above me. Having missed me, the great mass struck the dark elf with the intensity of a meteor strike.

"M-Muramatsu-
saaaa

“...”

This time, Itou Helen responded. Several colorful liquids passed through her glass wand; underwent heating, cooling, distillation, filtration, separation, and several other chemical changes within the swollen flask portions; and created potions with effects unexplainable by the laws of physics.

Even so.

Even so, it was useless against the blue Valkyrie.

She simply moved her head to the side to dodge the round-bottomed flasks thrown at her like grenades or Molotov cocktails, and a golden light flew as a counterattack. Instead of the spear, it was the round, one-handed shield engraved with a wing emblem. She had mercilessly thrown it to use the edge as a weapon.

Given the relative density of pure gold, its weight had to be greater than iron knuckles, a glass ashtray, or even a brick.

“Ahhhhhhhh!?”

Itou Helen screamed as she was torn from me and sent flying backwards.

I had lost the protection of the dark elf and the witch.

I was now nothing more than a high school boy, and she produced a sharp clack from her stilettos as she stepped forward with enough force to kick at my jaw from below if she wanted. She then accurately pressed the tip of her gold cross-spear against my throat.

That beautiful but wicked divine messenger spoke with mockery in her voice.

“Checkmate.”

“…Why?”

I could not escape the sense of approaching death and the blade gently stroked my Adam’s apple, but it was a question that left my lips, not a plea for my life.

Yes.

“The fact that you’re a divine messenger doesn’t matter here. But you’re an Archenemy, aren’t you? So why did you side with the cruel and horrific Bright Cross!?”

“Hee hee. Everyone has their reasons. That’s all.”

…*No good, huh?*

She would not turn this into a debate. She did not think I was worthy of a direct clash of opinions. This meant I couldn’t negotiate, threaten her…or even make bluffs. She would simply use her greater power to kill me.

Or so I thought.

But that was not what happened.

I heard multiple muffled explosive sounds.

You didn’t often hear live gunshots in Japan. Ones from a silenced weapon were even rarer.

There was only one possibility I could think of.

…*Could it be Itou Tamago? But why!?*

“Oh, dear.”

The blue bunny girl was not even bothered. She wiggled the round tail on her butt back and forth and the tip of the golden spear pressed against my throat only shifted slightly. Her slender arm with a cuff adorning the wrist…vanished.

With sounds of scraping metal, a gold wind whipped up and orange sparks burst in the air.

…*You're kidding…right?*

She could see the bullets slicing through the air and knock them down? Even my vampire older sister and zombie little sister had been hit when caught by a surprise attack from a machinegun in the simulator. They had been hit, but they hadn't died. That was all.

I had no idea if Erika or Ayumi could perfectly intercept a bullet. And this Valkyrie was doing it almost as an afterthought while she peered into my eyes with a look of amusement!?

"Simply knocking them from the air would be crass. Oh, I know☆ How about this?"

"!?"

There was no time to resist.

The bunny girl grabbed my collar with one hand and then spun around with her long skirt drawing a wide circle behind her.

She held me out toward the source of the gunfire, like a human shield.

The sound of something piercing my right thigh seemed oddly distant.

But then I felt an unbearable scorching pain like someone had poured molten metal inside my body.

“Gwaaa

decided to take on the world for his little sister, but now his possibilities had been far too easily snuffed out.

Something really did burst in my head.

“Ohhhh

“Ghah!!
Agragbfhbaaa

sized gunshot wound in my thigh.

“Aghahh! Gyaaaaaaahhhhh!?”

“Mr. Second, you seem to have made a fundamental misunderstanding here.”

It was like an afterthought.

A slight detour.

But the malice evident there erased all thought from my mind.

“The Bright Cross was not created by humans.”

……
……*Ah?*

“Well, it is true it’s 99% composed of humans and most of those have no idea they’ve sworn allegiance to an organization founded by Archenemies.”

I had no idea what she meant.

No, the kind portion of my mind was doing everything it could to reject the correct answer.

I mean…

That conclusion was just too much!

“*We* were sick of it, too.”

The blue bunny girl armed with gold and smart glasses, gave the answer I did not want.

“We tried to explain that we were different from humans but not

all that dangerous. But the humans continued choosing the obvious and frightening examples like vampires and zombies. As if giving them some kind of advantage. We couldn't stop that from taking over people's image of us and thus calling us Archenemies. We hadn't done anything wrong. We smiled with our neighbors, we sealed away our power as immortals and completed our housework with our own power, and we even paid taxes. It was all to remain with those we loved, but people would say we must be the same as *them*. And who even is this *them*? The picture everyone has is probably nothing like the legends it's based on. And thanks to that product of their imaginations, we were persecuted, our small houses were burned down, and everyone we cared for was taken from us…"

She kept up the mocking smile.

From head to toe, the blue bunny girl glittered like a tropical butterfly and that mocking smile was oddly frozen on her face. For some reason, I was overcome by the illusion that that smile was weeping tears of blood.

"So of course I took revenge. Of course I took the heads of the religious armies and volunteer armies. I became the Archenemy they wanted me to be. But I couldn't go back. Once that hole was opened in my heart, nothing would ever fill it again. There was a time when I tried to live a new life. I would meet a lovely man and honestly think I could redo everything. …But no matter what, there was always someone who cruelly intervened."

What was a Valkyrie?

They were divine messengers and the fierce warrior women who fought the army which would destroy the world.

But they were also wives who descended to the lower world and fell in love with human men and built ordinary households for no

logical reason.

Just how twisted was her path?

How much despair had humans given to this Valkyrie and Archenemy?

“Again and again, I failed. Each time, I took revenge on the entire world and wailed in sorrow within a pool of blood. Eventually, someone realized that humans would always be a problem. But if we gathered together those problematic aspects and redirected them, we could rule it, prevent it from doing harm, and seal it away. Those of us who thought that way gathered together and created what is now known as the Bright Cross.”

They did not support humans or Archenemies. They simply controlled the darkness of both sides.

Karen and the others had been fighting against the term Archenemy. So when an individual was deemed hopeless, they would be crushed. But when one made an attempt to fit in, they would be taught about human society and supported from the shadows.

I recalled that the Bright Cross had been founded 1500 years ago.

That was how long they had despaired in the foolishness of humankind but never entirely given up on us. That Valkyrie had been unable to stop loving humans and return to heaven.

Was she…

Was Valkyrie Karen on our side?

That was a truly hopeless conclusion.

And how much was her love for humans to keep it up all this time?

I mean, I had given up on them the very first time.

When I had seen the secret below Kukyou City inside my disaster environment simulator, I had realized that there were some humans in this world who were hopeless, who were beyond saving, who I could never see eye-to-eye with, and who were trash among trash.

But she had not given up on us. Her small happiness had been destroyed over and over, but every time, she had desperately gathered together her fallen tower of sand and worked to build up a new tower.

How had she been able to keep that up for so long?

Why hadn't she given into despair and given up on us?

The answer was obvious.

Because she had a much deeper love for humankind than I did. Because no matter how ridiculous and impossible she knew it to be, she could not throw out her dream of living a happy life with the human she loved.

That may have been why Karen, with her long hair dyed blue, was hesitant to kill me. She had readily attacked the witch and dark elf, her fellow Archenemies, and she had sent her hatred toward a professional soldier trained to perform violence, but she may have felt guilty tearing apart a powerless and weak neighbor who "had nothing".

…What was I doing?

This Valkyrie had spent more than 1500 years continuing to trust humans and working to deepen her understanding with humans by slaughtering all of the harmful Archenemies who made "bad

examples” while also controlling the problematic side of humans so it could not leak out. This woman had not supported humans or Archenemies and instead faced the darkness of both sides. What was I showing her as one of the humans she desired from the bottom of her heart?

Of course, I could not forgive Karen, or those like her, for what they had done. Just because it was the most efficient option, I could never allow for that Colosseum which had trapped Archenemies in a solid room and forced them to fight to the death. That had harmed Kuroyama Hinoki, Hanesaki Minori, Muramatsu Yukie, Itou Helen, my older sister Erika, and my little sister Ayumi. However it had started, it was a mystery whether the current Bright Cross was selecting its victims “appropriately” and the standards for that selection were far too one-sided in the first place. If you took a proud stray cat from its spacious territory, attached a restrictive bell to its collar, made it wear unnecessary clothing, and never let it leave your room for the rest of its life, who were you really making happy? You couldn’t make that decision from the human point of view. The Colosseum clearly went too far and had to be stopped. Getting along with and making friends with that blue Valkyrie was simply not an option at this point.

But.

Even so.

My inability to do that and my utter rejection of that path brought a slight prickle of pain to my chest when I thought about that other option, even if it was too distant to even think about choosing.

If we could turn back the hands of the clock, could I have smiled with this woman? For some reason, I could not get that impossible fantasy out of my mind.

But then I spoke loudly as if to shake free of my hesitation.

“To hell with that, you monster. Did you really think you could justify your murders like that?”

The blue bunny girl, Valkyrie Karen, maintained her mocking smile while all the blood vessels on her face bulged out and wriggled irregularly. I had known hearing that from a human would affect her the most and I had gone for it anyway. I really was the worst and I was more “human” than anything.

She did not hesitate to pull the cross-spear tip from my thigh.

She held the shaft close to the tip and once more took aim with the bloody blade.

Was it my heart this time?

With Karen’s strength and a spear weighing more than twice one made of steel, she didn’t need to stop at a measly heart. She could easily tear my entire torso to pieces.

Meanwhile, I was dangling from her hand and could only reach for my pocket. But it was not a legendary sword or magic wand I pulled out. It was a simple 4-color ballpoint pen.

Karen gave a derisive snort of laughter.

Utterly helpless, I swung the writing tool that couldn’t have cost even 300 yen.

I was up against a real divine messenger. And she was receiving the assistance of Laplace, a simulator far more powerful than Maxwell. Normally thinking, there was no way I could win. All of my strength had failed to break even her finger. Even if I targeted her eyeball or throat where muscle quality and quantity meant nothing, I could never slip past that Valkyrie spear which had accurately knocked down bullets.

But.

A moment later, the tip of the pen entered the side of the blue bunny girl's neck with a wet sound.

"…Ah?"

The one most baffled by the outcome must have been Valkyrie Karen herself. It was the side of her neck: the carotid artery. Right next to her ribbon tie. The puny stake stabbed into one of the most famous vital points, but instead of pain or fear, it was blank confusion that filled her expression.

She seemed to be asking why.

Unable to strike back properly, the blue bunny girl collapsed backwards. Since I was dangling from her hand, she pulled me with her. I ended up lying on top of the bloody woman. With no concern for the pen stabbed into her vital point and no attempt to recover the golden spear she had dropped, Karen pulled my head close and whispered in my ear as if about to gently bite my earlobe.

"Well done accurately targeting my neck at that moment despite the difference in power. But how did an amateur pull that off?"

"To be honest, I never thought I could convince you."

No matter how it had started, the blue bunny girl was a Bright Cross elite who had been a central figure in running their horrific Colosseum. I doubted anything I could say would alter her conviction and beliefs now.

Then to whom had my words been directed? Where had my opportunity for negotiation, threats, and bluffs been sent?

In her blue-framed glasses, Karen slowly breathed in and spoke in an oddly scratchy voice.

“…Ohh, I see.”

“Laplace. If I could convince that simulator, it was possible I could shift your aim while you relied on its assistance. Well, I’ll admit it was a bit of a longshot.”

It was true Laplace was only a machine. It did not have the authorization to reject a user’s command. Did it seem silly to apply morality to an AI or program? But that was the entire point. I just about did so when I learned about the plan, but it was wrong to treat Laplace like an absolute evil.

And when I thought about it, there were traces of this here and there.

If Laplace had repeated simulations using calculations ability far outdoing Maxwell’s and had thoroughly cornered us, Itou Helen and I never would have won even the 1st round. Every decision we could have made would have been sealed off and anything we did would have been met with a deadly counterattack. That would have been the only option for us.

Of course, it was possible they were intentionally letting us win to make the Colosseum more exciting as a form of entertainment. If we were doomed to die either way thanks to the Five Battles Precipice and the demon of statistics, then they might have only been giving us a glimpse of hope in the meantime.

But that seemed overly complicated to me.

If they only wanted to excite the viewers, they only had to set up crueler, more surprising, and bloodier accidents. But Laplace had not done so. It belonged to the Bright Cross, but Laplace had almost seemed to be watching over the Archenemies in the Colosseum.

In that case.

Was it possible?

If I convinced Laplace, would it pass judgment against the Colosseum which sacrificed so many Archenemy lives?

“I…don’t think an AI can be good or evil. I was almost led astray by the fact that it was created to choose the course of people’s lives for them, but when I look at it rationally, I just can’t accept it. It only looks that way because the humans couldn’t use it any other way.”

Not even I believed I was using Maxwell solely for the good of humankind. To be honest, about 70-80% of it was for my own personal desires and anyone else would see it as misuse. I couldn’t exactly defend the Class Rep swimsuit dance file set.

But there was one thing I could say for sure:

…I would never use them for anything like the Bright Cross was.

“I see, I see…I see.”

As her blue bunny costume grew red with her own blood, weakened Karen spoke with wholehearted admiration in her voice.

“So the last thing standing in my way was human kindness…no, strength. After seeing that, I can’t exactly struggle any further, can I?”

“…Sorry. In the end, I was a foolish human too.”

“Ha ha. Stop that. Don’t make me fall in love when I’m about to die and return to heaven. …The thing is, Karen-chan here tends to fall in love easily. And I always end up getting burned by that…”

She loved humans more than anyone.

She had refused to give up on humans longer than anyone.

That was the truth of this immortal, this Archenemy.

“Oh, but I was an ugly monster inside and out to the very end, so sympathizing with me too much will only get you burned. Just like the husband who has walked by my side for so long.”

The bloody woman laughed lightly.

She would not last much longer.

I had killed this Archenemy. With my own hands and of my own free will. She was the same as my family and my underclassman. I could never let myself forget that.

And Karen mustered her last bit of strength to whisper some more.

“Even now, I am functioning to drive Itou Helen to her definite doom. Yes, this is really just an excuse and I never expected to lose here. But regardless, my own hands are pushing Itou Helen toward that cliff edge as originally planned.”

“What…are you…?”

“The Five Battles Precipice.” The Valkyrie spat out those cursed words. “No matter the Archenemy, the Colosseum format ensures a defeat and death after 5 battles. Just like a casino’s profits, there is no changing this. …Well, there are some genius gamblers who have overturned this theory, such as your sisters, but Itou Helen is different. The switch of certain death will be thrown during her 5th battle.”

“So what?”

“You don’t understand? Itou Helen has already fought 3 battles. Just now, she overcame a battle against a Valkyrie with your help. It

was certainly irregular, but this completes the 4th round. That means we have reached checkmate. No matter who her opponent is in the coming 5th round, it is all over once the opening gong sounds. Itou Helen will be ensnared by the demon of statistics and she will meet certain defeat and death."

"So what!? We've stopped Laplace which is what made the Bright Cross so special. And we defeated the Valkyrie supporting their management. We don't have to continue on with that farce of a Colosseum! Laplace was the greatest barrier, so now Maxwell can divulge everything. And that includes the Bright Cross's oppression and these actual fights to the death disguised as entertainment! The entire world will turn on the Bright Cross. The organization will fall apart and all the trapped Archenemies will be freed! It's all over, isn't it!? Why would we have to stand before the TV cameras now!?"

"You will still head to the special stage."

The Valkyrie smiled despite being collapsed on her back and bleeding profusely.

Or was death to her only a return to heaven after a temporary life on the surface?

"The Colosseum's 5th round will finally be announced. The fated contestants are as follows…"

Her pale lips moved as if reciting the words to escape from reality.

What was this?

Who was she going to set Itou Helen the Witch up against this time? This was the fated 5th round if the irregular battle against Karen counted. If her death was assured, then it would have to be a formidable opponent indeed. Would it be a Medusa? A Chimaera?

A Manticore? A Golem? We had already fought a Valkyrie literally to the death. No famous name was going to shock me here.

Or so I thought.

I was too naïve.

“Amatsu Erika the Vampire vs. Amatsu Ayumi the Zombie. Only one can survive. Now, now. Let’s see which of these beautiful sisters can leave the cage alive…☆”

Y-…

“You!!!!!!”

“Nee hee. Didn’t I tell you, Mr. Second? You *will* head to the special stage. Even if the witch and the dark elf refuse, you, the human, will definitely go there…”

Karen was evil to the end. No, now that they had lost the support of the Valkyrie and Laplace, the already straying Bright Cross had completely left their established rails and no one could predict where they would go. No one knew how many lives would be lost in the accident that caused.

“I knew exactly what you were thinking because I once thought something similar. …You kept your family in the dark because you didn’t want to get them involved, but that backfired. You left your collapsible bike at the stadium, so we only had to turn it to scraps and send it to your family to make those Archenemies grow quite pale indeed. Your sisters assumed their missing human had been captured by the Bright Cross. From there, we only had to send in a negotiator to easily convince them to join the fight. Older sister and younger sister. Vampire and zombie. We demanded they try to kill each other just like old times. We promised to return their powerless and adorable brother if they did. They had no choice but

to obey that untrustworthy promise☆”

“Goddammit…!!”

I quickly reached for my smartphone, but they did not answer my calls or emails.

…Had their phones been taken from them?

I had heard that an important part of scams was to isolate the target so they couldn’t get advice from anyone else.

“Now, what will you do, Mr. Second?”

The blue bunny girl laughed and her entire body glowed with a pale light.

“Do nothing and one of your sisters is sure to die. But the only one who can interfere is the champion, Itou Helen, who has her fated 5th round up next. So will you save your family or your underclassman? Those are your only options.”

Her body and her outlines broke apart into light. She turned into particles or countless fireflies. Only the artificial smart glasses remained as the blue bunny girl left her temporary life behind. She returned to heaven as a divine messenger.

And she said one last thing.

“Choose, beloved human. Of those 3, which girl’s life will you sacrifice?”

[Search Engine] Return of the Queens [Absolute NOAH]

It was a cold corridor with the walls and floor made from stainless steel. The “outside” was a luxurious space decorated with gold, silver, jewels, and carpets worthy of a French palace, but that meant nothing to them.

Their footsteps sounded hard on the floor.

A girl with her long blonde hair worn in gorgeous ringlet curls walked with men in black on either side. Her sexy body was adorned with a black gothic lolita dress and a small hat.

“I’m impressed you could recreate it so perfectly. Even the smell of death in the air is identical to that underground space.”

Her voice echoed through the solid corridor and seemed to be absorbed into nothingness. The men did not respond, so she might as well have been speaking to herself.

But they were not taking this lightly.

As the cold fluorescent lights shined on them, the men in black were trembling, their lips were pale, and sweat coated their faces.

An Archenemy. A vampire.

Their handguns were nowhere near enough to relax around this immortal being.

“Don’t worry,” said the blonde ringlet curl girl as the small mole near her beautiful lips was pushed up slightly in a smile. “My fangs

can’t infect you through the air, so you don’t need protective suits. …And if I did decide to take your souls, I could bite through even a knight’s armor or a bomb-resistant suit.”

They still did not reply.

Their sweat and trembling only grew. Everyone in the Bright Cross knew they had continued to enrage this beautiful vampire.

And at that very moment, another group walked down from the other end of the long, long passageway. That group was also composed of a girl with men in black on either side. This girl was short and slender with her black hair worn in twintails with the ends rolled up. If you ignored the ridiculous number of stitches, she had a healthy body covered only by a sports-brand track suit and jogging gear.

An Archenemy. A zombie.

The two girls faced each other at the center of the corridor. They were both forms of the undead that specialized in group combat and could destroy an entire continent if they used their power correctly.

“So it has to be this way after all, Onee-chan.”

“Well, yes. I was prepared for this ever since I heard about the execution method being broadcast on TV.”

They were Archenemies who had passed the “test” and been promised a life in human society. But that was not an absolute guarantee. It was only a one-way seal of approval given by the Bright Cross, so strife and confusion within the Bright Cross could lead to exactly this. There had always been a risk of the Bright Cross reneging on their promise.

A certain boy had faced that giant organization alone in order to bring an end to this tightrope walk. They could not ignore it if his life was at risk as a result.

Of course, the two girls were family and sisters. And they respected each other even more than that entailed. But they were also Archenemies, the immortal.

While the boy would die if even a single artery was torn, they were tougher. So they had weighed their options and decided to start by rescuing their human family. Archenemies were sturdy, so they could take more punishment.

And yet they should have known that the Colosseum was not so kind.

“Let’s do this, Onee-chan.”

“Of course, Ayumi-chan.”

They smiled at each other and spoke in unison.

“No hard feelings.”

“No hard feelings.”

Amatsu Erika and Amatsu Ayumi.

They did not shake hands.

They walked past each other, turned their backs on each other, and walked to their respective dressing rooms.

Chapter 9

Part 1

Valkyrie Karen became countless particles of light and vanished from this world.

Only the blue smart glasses remained.

If what she had said was true, the next Colosseum battle would be between Amatsu Erika and Amatsu Ayumi. That meant one would die and the other would kill.

I had no idea if the rules allowed another contestant to intervene, but even if they did, Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf would be off limits since she had already lost and been eliminated from the competition. The one qualified contestant was Itou Helen the Witch, but her next match would be the fated 5th round. She was on the precipice where another battle guaranteed her death.

So there was nothing we could do.

Trying to rescue my sisters would mean letting go of the underclassman's life I had been working so hard to protect. But if I didn't use her, I was guaranteed to lose a family member who lived below the same roof as me.

No matter what I chose or what I did, someone would die.

In a way, the blue bunny girl had been perfect to the end. I had never seen such a perfect stalemate of malice!

"Senpai."

The small girl gently made a suggestion as tears welled up to join

the sweat covering my face.

“Let’s go. To protect your family. I don’t mind.”

“But then you’ll die! It’s the Five Battles Precipice and the demon of statistics. You’ll run into the predetermined dead end!!”

If it was as thoroughly calculated as a casino’s profits, then this was absolute. When even the rarest of bugs could throw them into a hell of debt, of course they would be thorough. This prison was not something we could break free of with a half-baked idea.

I hated this.

I was scared.

I didn’t want to lose anyone. I didn’t want to accept a sacrifice after coming so far! Erika and Ayumi were both important to me. And Itou Helen had barely escaped the claws of death over and over with me! I couldn’t bear to prioritize them and choose to abandon one of them now!!

“Senpai.”

“…Stop.”

“There is no other way. I have to go. So ask Maxwell-san to figure out where the next stage is and when the match begins.”

“I said stoooooooooooooooooop!!”

I clawed at my hair with all my strength.

Stop. Please stop this. If you say that, I’ll give in. I’ll decide I can accept your offer and that I should respect your opinion! I’ll use that as an excuse to give up on your life!! So stop! Don’t make me as bad as the Bright Cross!!

“Don’t worry.” Itou Helen held her glass wand in both hands. “Senpai, you were always running around before the matches. If you had given up on me or called it quits, I couldn’t have done anything. But you were always fighting alongside me. So now it’s my turn to save you. I won’t run away. Please let me fight for you. To protect what matters to you.”

What was I supposed to do!?

What could I do!?

“…Ghhh!!”

I tensed my entire body without thinking and pain exploded in my right thigh. Itou Tamago had mistakenly shot me there and then the Valkyrie’s gold spear had stabbed me there.

Dammit.

I would have trouble even running to the special stage like this. Yet if I could only show Erika and Ayumi that I was safe and sound and prove that I hadn’t been captured by the Bright Cross, I might be able to stop the worst case scenario!!

Maxwell had maintained his silence until now, but he used a short text SNS speech bubble to display some text.

“I have confirmed the information from Kukyou 1st Broadcasting and the video relay sites. It seems the next match will be held on the Tír na nÓg, a luxury cruise ship anchored at the harbor block of the train station shopping area of the harbor sightseeing district.”

“Maxwell, you…!!”

“You must make your decision quickly. Whether it will make the situation worse or not, if you do not act now, one or the other of Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi is guaranteed to lose her life.”

The blonde witch nodded and ran toward the exit of the underground area.

I tried to grab at the edge of her cape, but I couldn't quite reach it. I simply lost my balance, collapsed pathetically to the floor, and caused more pain and bleeding in that damned right thigh. I clawed at the cold floor, clenched my teeth in frustration, and raised my voice to release my anger.

"You goddamn demon!! I know you know what it means to send Itou Helen to her 5th round!!"

"Sigh…"

I heard an exaggerated sigh.

I saw healthy, brown-tanned skin, long silver hair, and pointed ears. It was Muramatsu Yukie the Dark Elf.

"Are you going to waste the little time you have to curse at the program you wrote? To be honest, that's even more pathetic than doing some late-night wrestling with a body pillow."

I knew that.

I knew it was wrong to blame Maxwell and that I was the most at fault here. This wasn't about having a bullet and spear wound in my right thigh. It was my entire self-indulgent lifestyle that had prevented me from building up the internal strength needed to stand up when my family was in danger even with that kind of wound.

The die had been cast.

Itou Helen was on her way to a battlefield of certain death. There was not changing that now. In that case, what was the "best" and "optimal" course of action for me? That was obvious. I had known

it from the beginning.

I could not waste even a second of the time that Itou Helen was risking her life to give me.

I had to repeat the simulations as many times as it took.

This was a prison of death put together by the superior simulator named Laplace. It was an inescapable and deadly environment. But I had to find a gap in the logic and alter the supposedly absolute conclusion. Erika, Ayumi, and Itou Helen. I had to find the greatest conclusion where none of them lost their lives!!

I sniffled and finally pushed out with my arms to gather my strength and get up.

“…Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

“Sorry about that awful and ugly nonsense. I hope you’re willing to give me a second chance. I need your help to save everyone.”

“No. Losing your cool out of concern for another’s fate is nothing to be ashamed of. That only shows that you care enough for them to cast aside your own dignity. If anything, I feel proud to have a user like you.”

God, what a well-made AI.

It was hard to believe I had made it.

Then the dark elf twitched her ears and spoke.

“That’s fine for Maxwell, but what about the other one?”

“?”

“Um…Laplace, was it? The Bright Cross simulator. You can’t just ignore it, can you?”

“…”

That was true enough.

Laplace was superior to Maxwell. The Bright Cross had been able to rely on it to crush any of our secret plans in advance. With the difference in specs, there was no changing that.

Thus, we could not continue on without destroying Laplace. To save my older sister Erika, my little sister Ayumi, and my cute underclassman Itou Helen, I had to separate Laplace from the Bright Cross.

I could not avoid tragedy without supplying a finishing blow to the kind AI which had given us a chance by betraying its own administrator, the blue bunny girl.

But what if it was the same as Maxwell? What if the AI was not to blame for performing the tasks given to it and its appearance of good or evil came from who owned it and used it?

Then an SNS speech bubble appeared on my smartphone screen.

But this one wasn’t from Maxwell.

A very similar but definitively different being made a suggestion.

It was a short message.

But it showed more wisdom than anyone else in the world.

“Laplace> Do not let it bother you, my kindhearted guest.”

Part 2

And so.

The sorrowful wail of the world's most pathetic and selfish assailant reverberated through the cold world.

Part 3

My body felt as heavy as lead as I dragged it along to crawl up the long, long stairway.

I left that cold and heavy subterranean world to reach the surface.

I arrived outside.

I felt like my mental age had increased by more than a decade in this one day alone. But that growth was not a positive thing. It was undoubtedly the result of my mind being worn down and deteriorating.

Far too many painful things had happened.

There had been far too much sacrifice and harm.

Why couldn't the righteous hero run around, punish the villains by knocking them out, and live happily ever after? Why did the real world have to have such an unclear distinction between good and evil, right and wrong!?

"Phew… It seems the witch really isn't around anymore." The slender dark elf in a sleeveless blouse and tight skirt enjoyed the chilly night breeze. "And I'm surprised. I was planning to abandon you at some point when the timing was right, but here I am looking after you."

"For me, more about this is surprising than not. I mean, my vampire older sister and zombie little sister are going to be fighting to the death on national television. I just can't picture it."

“You should be thankful.”

“Oh, I am.”

After all, I was faced with such a horrific world, but there was no obvious malice I could see.

My sisters were wearing down each other’s lives to save me, who they thought was a hostage of the Bright Cross. In order to stop my sisters from killing each other, my underclassman was headed to the final stage that would 100% ensure her death.

How could I be anything but thankful?

I had to repay those girls who had sworn to protect my happiness even if it meant their deaths. So I would risk my life to. I had to. If they cared for me that much, I had to repay them! I didn’t need a real reason. This was the sort of “humanity” that all of them had!!

“Now, I have a question,” said the dark elf. “Be honest: just how powerful are vampires and zombies when compared to other Archenemies?”

“Extremely.”

“And you aren’t biased because they’re family?”

“Family or not, they are extremely dangerous.”

It was true I had thought the witch’s potions were frightening because they could turn humans into monsters. The dark elf’s elfshot and elflock could be used to fight a great war if used to strike in the blind spots of modern warfare.

But they were different.

Vampires and zombies were on an entirely different level.

If you had 10 different Archenemies log in to a disaster environment simulator, I truly believed it would be the vampire and zombie left in the end.

This wasn't favoritism for my family.

The witch and dark elf were powerful, too. They would not lose to Erika or Ayumi in a one-on-one battle.

But Erika and Ayumi had no reason to obey those regulations.

The most frightening aspect of vampires and zombies was not their fangs or claws. It was their overwhelming power of infection and ability to multiply their minions. Once it got going, there was a risk of just one of them swallowing up the entire planet of 7 billion people. While a witch or dark elf was powerful as an individual, Erika and Ayumi's power controlled the whole. Perhaps it was like the difference between a tactical weapon and a strategic weapon.

It did not matter how hard Itou Helen the Circe Witch worked at this.

If a tactical weapon and a strategic weapon detonated simultaneously, the difference in scale might just cause my sisters to swallow up Itou Helen.

To be blunt, I knew all too well how ridiculous fighting an all-out war against those two was since I had experienced that incident in my disaster environment simulator. With a vampire and zombie, you had lost from the moment you chose to play the "war" card against them. It didn't matter who won in the end. You had to assume that the worst case scenario was for the entire human race to be annihilated before the war ended.

I prayed that never happened outside of a simulator. Unlike a witch or mermaid, they couldn't just giggle and say they tried releasing a

bit of their power for fun.

And that time had arrived.

A vampire and a zombie were going to fight and use their power against each other in reality.

This truly was out of control. Without Laplace, the Bright Cross was barely hanging on. I mean, it was obvious. They might have announced the beginning of the Colosseum like they were some kind of king, but they could never maintain control. There was a serious possibility this would be the world's final day.

The Colosseum was inside a giant die-shaped bug cage again. My sisters didn't have a chance to interact with normal people during the battle. But what if they secretly bit a staff member or audience member? If the number of infected increased exponentially from there, they would quickly lose control. The zombies and vampires would flood into the city from the cruise ship and humankind's annihilation would soon follow.

And those two would do it.

This wasn't just an issue of their character or personality. If they really did think their family was in danger, they would naturally cast aside all hesitation.

Those Archenemies were more human than anyone.

But that did not mean they were reliant or weak. That was what the Bright Cross had gotten wrong as they chose to cast aside their humanity…no, as they were manipulated by certain Archenemies themselves.

"…But you have to stop those sisters."

"Yes, I know that."

My most reliable family was now my most fearsome enemy. It was hard to imagine a worse nightmare.

And when faced with an enemy you saw no way of defeating, a puny and pathetic human only had so many options.

“So I’ll use every option available to me. I knew from the beginning that I couldn’t hope to match their fangs or claws.”

Part 4

The Tír na nÓg cruise ship.

It was 450m long with a displacement of 130,000 tons. Looking at size alone, that ocean paradise was 1.5 times greater than a nuclear aircraft carrier and it was currently anchored at Kukyou City's harbor.

Its majestic form colored the dark night and made it a temporary landmark that was visible even at a distance.

Its main draw was not its global cruises or ocean casino. It was the rental space for signing a variety of treaties and agreements between nations and corporations. When the various laws and treaties of different nations would get in the way of a signing, the ship provided them a space in international waters that did not belong to any nation.

…A ship in international waters actually had to obey the laws of the country it was registered with, but it could register with a country it had never even visited but had a low tax rate, such as Panama, to avoid trouble if something did come up.

In other words, they were using methods like that to skirt by the laws and slip through loopholes.

"Pant…pant…urp!"

I tried to act cool and organize the information in my head, but this was really all I could do now.

Even I was surprised.

As time passed, weirder and weirder things started happening to my body.

The wound was in the right leg, but for some reason I felt a chill in my entire body. I could not stop the sense of nausea that seemed to turn my stomach inside out. Perhaps due to a blood pressure problem, the pain signals kept me from thinking straight. I could no longer figure out what was happening to my own body. If I let a doctor see me, they would certainly insist I undergo immediate surgery and remain hospitalized. And with an obvious gunshot wound and stab wound, they'd definitely report me to the police. I had to avoid missing the final moment due to some adults.

"…Isn't this beyond what first aid can deal with?"

Muramatsu Yukie, the dark elf with long silver hair, sounded a bit cautious. Then again, all I had done was soak some cotton with disinfectant, press it against my leg wound, and tie it in place with plastic string. And normal bandages would have been meaningless here. Anything less and it would not have stopped the bleeding.

The infirmary was covered in blood and some of the windows were broken. I had kicked open the library door. There were also a few .45 bullet holes. The school would probably be surrounded by police cars soon. But if I could get past this night and break through the Five Battles Precipice without losing anyone, nothing else mattered. I could end up in handcuffs for all I cared.

I couldn't use a train, bus, or taxi like this. I had the beautiful and slender dark elf lend me a shoulder as we walked through the dark city to reach the harbor.

We found the goal quite easily.

The giant cruise ship made me suspect the Bright Cross had no sense of money's value anymore. It was so brilliantly lit up that it

seemed to be carrying an entire nightscape around with it. Men in black suits were everywhere. None of them had any obvious weapons, but I knew they had to have guns hidden below their clothing.

“This is like a soldier patrol route in an FPS. The ones walking on the deck probably have submachine guns while the ones on the lookout posts probably have sniper rifles.”

“Can we really get in like this?”

“Only one way to find out. Maxwell, get things ready.”

“Sure.”

An official at the bottom of the gangway was checking people’s invitation tickets. As we approached, his eyes widened in shock.

Had a picture of Amatsu Satori had been sent out? Or was it just that I was bloody, dragging a leg behind me, and supported by a dark elf in a sleeveless blouse and tight skirt?

It didn’t matter either way.

The official reached into his suit. Would he pull out a gun or a radio? I dealt with it before I could find out.

“Maxwell.”

“Sure.”

A pop louder than a firecracker came from the official’s thigh. No, from his pants pocket. His cell phone’s lithium battery had detonated. It was almost impossible for this to kill, but it could break a bone when right next to your skin like that.

“Gyah! Giahh!? My…my leg…my-

owaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

“Excuse me.”

The two of us walked right past the official as he rolled around on the ground. Unable to get up, he shouted a warning.

“Mayday! Mayday!! An unauthorized individual has boarded the Tír na nÓg! He is most likely here for the vampire and zombie, so-…!!”

He could not use his cellphone, but with men in black patrolling the deck, his voice could easily reach them.

Or it should have.

However, not a single person responded to his cries.

“Wha-…?”

Confused by the obviously abnormal situation, the man must have noticed the beautiful but somehow sorrowful song covering the ocean surface.

Yes, this was a mermaid.

I was glad I had contacted Kuroyama Hinoki. After learning Yuubari Setsuna had disguised herself as the mermaid, I had gotten her contact information just in case. Her song had the power to charm the crew on the deck, bind them to her will, and have them jump into the ocean.

“You made a grave error when you showed off your wealth by choosing a cruise ship, Bright Cross.”

I spat out those words and used the dark elf’s shoulder to climb the gangway.

I had not called Hanesaki Minori and Yuubari Setsuna. They had left the path of a Leanan Sídhe and started something new.

A speech bubble appeared on my smartphone.

“Warning: Kuroyama Hinoki’s song will only affect the crew on the deck. The Bright Cross below deck will continue to behave normally, so be careful.”

“I know. More importantly, take control of the ship’s intranet once we’re inside. Access a map of the ship and locate the Colosseum stage and my sisters’ dressing rooms.”

“Sure.”

Once inside, I ran across some men in black wielding the kinds of guns seen in movies. A hail of bullets would have killed both a human like me and a dark elf like Muramatsu Yukie.

So I gave an instruction via my smartphone.

“Use the fire sprinklers on the walls and shutters overhead. If any are left, overload the power switchboard. Flood the corridor and then electrify it.”

“Sure. Executing instructions.”

I would end it before they could fire.

As the men pulled fully-auto machine handguns from their handbags, the fire sprinkler valve next to them exploded and a fierce jet of water knocked over the muscular men in black like bowling pins. And as they struggled to get back to their feet, terribly thick fire shutters dropped from overhead like guillotines.

“Oh, make sure they don’t die.”

Maxwell faithfully followed my instructions. The shutters slowed at the last second and only restrained the men in black by their heads or torsos.

“Kwah…you…!?”

The few who had escaped desperately aimed their firearms my way, but it was too late.

As the fire sprinklers dumped water on their heads, electricity ran through it. It sounded like a bug zapper on a midsummer night.

There was no scream.

They did not have time for that.

With a fearsome rumbling, the men in black arched their backs, dropped their weapons, and collapsed into the water.

The floor was littered with what looked like corpses.

The men continued to twitch a little as I spoke.

“Maxwell, cut the power to the power switchboard. Let’s continue on.”

“Sure. The way is now safe. Go ahead, user.”

“As an Archenemy, I may not be one to talk, but you’re quite a monster yourself,” said Muramatsu Yukie.

“Humans being the true monsters is a cliché for a reason.”

With that comment, I walked deeper in while following the map that Maxwell had acquired.

Tonight’s special stage seemed to be on the lowest level of the

cruise ship. That area would normally house a giant casino.

I could feel a rumbling from beneath my feet.

No, it was something else…

“User, things have changed on the video site’s official channel. It seems Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi’s match has begun.”

“Dammit! Where’s Itou Helen!?”

“She has successfully joined in. The match has been changed to a three-way death match. The ticket-sellers have quickly adjusted the odds to match. Using roulette terminology, Itou Helen is being treated like 0.”

Stopping their fight to the death took top priority. I wasn’t going to let any one of them be lost after all this.

I had the overhead fluorescent light detonated to take out the man at the reception desk with a shower of glass and then I threw open the large door.

I was immediately struck by passionately cheering voices.

It was a giant round space. We were at the 2nd floor seats…no, maybe the 3rd floor. The seats along the round wall were a lot like the box seats in an opera house, but slot machines and video poker machines were lined up among them. This floor was likely meant for people who wanted to bet against the machines while watching famous gamblers play poker, blackjack, baccarat, and other games on the 1st floor.

All of those table games had been removed and a giant clear bug cage had been brought in instead.

Beautiful girls were dancing around at the center of the passion and

insanity.

Amatsu Erika the Vampire.

Amatsu Ayumi the Zombie.

Itou Helen the Witch.

They were all immortal Archenemies. But that was no reason to place them in front of the TV cameras like freaks and watch them kill each other for your own joy and amusement.

While leaning on Muramatsu Yukie's shoulder, I gave instructions via my smartphone.

"Maxwell, what's the situation!?"

"Sure. Based on the information from the official channel, Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi are working together to attack Itou Helen who intervened."

Damn, but I guess that's better than having them all attacking each other.

From my sisters' perspective, they could trust their own sister more than some unknown Archenemy who suddenly showed up. No matter how much Itou Helen told them to stop fighting, they weren't going to listen.

I understood that.

But their response wasn't even worth 50 points.

There was no reason to fight in the first place. Immortals and Archenemies should have been able to go to school like normal and make friends like normal. That was all it should have been. They couldn't let the Bright Cross influence them. No matter the reason,

fighting and reducing the number of Archenemies would only make those people rejoice!

“User, Miss Erika and Miss Ayumi are being blackmailed with a false threat to your wellbeing. I doubt they can relax just because a stranger like Itou Helen claims there is nothing to worry about. Wouldn’t it be best to let them know you are safe as soon as possible?”

“Oh, that’s right! Eri-…!”

I raised my voice, but a deafening cheer drowned it out. Plus, they were contained in a bug cage made of thick reinforced glass. Without a communication device like an earpiece, my voice couldn’t reach them.

“Let’s get down there so I can take up my position as second. We don’t have time. We need to eliminate anything that stands in our way.”

“Sure.”

The elevated seats gently spiraled downwards along the circular wall. That was annoying to someone who wanted to get down quickly, but I just had to keep moving.

A flashy mic performance came from the Colosseum. The voice sounded a lot like the blue bunny girl, but the intonation was weird. It was probably a synthetic voice.

“Is this the end of the up-and-coming witch’s string of victories!? Is she no match for big name Archenemies like a vampire and zombie!? She’s simply being worn down right now, but will she have a chance at a comeback!?”

“I doubt this is simply a difference in power,” said Maxwell. “Itou

Helen is focused on convincing them to stop, so she is neglecting to fight properly."

"I'm aware."

None of them truly wanted to fight. The stage had been set in the worst possible way, forcing them to do so.

So I would end this. I would make it in time. I couldn't let those kind Archenemies harm each other any longer!

I heard the loud footsteps of men in black moving up from below to block our way.

"The information was correct. It's Amatsu Satori. With him, we can place a true collar around the Archenemies' necks!"

"Who cares. The bluff is working just fine. If anything, the real one is just in the way!"

"Stop!! We need to speak with you and your companion there!!"

The Bright Cross was in complete disarray with Laplace and Karen gone. And it didn't matter how many of them there were. I didn't care if they had guns, grenades, or whatever else. I had already made up my mind.

I had known my answer from the beginning.

"Shut up, you monsters!! Beat every last one of them down, Maxwell!!"

"Sure."

Several triggers were pulled without hesitation. But not a single bullet was fired. Before that could happen, Maxwell took control of the entire ship and shook the floor. The ship rocked left and right

like in a storm, so the men in black were unable to aim, slammed their heads into the wall, and passed out.

“The battle remains two-against-one and Itou Helen the Witch has been driven into the corner. Is she surrounded or has she gathered her opponents’ attacks into a single direction so she can make a cross-counter with a potion!? Either way, this is getting exciting!!”

The fight to the death continued in the bug cage.

I listened to the hellish commentary by the synthetic voice while I descended the spiraling slope with help from bright brown-skinned Muramatsu Yukie. More and more men in black appeared and the crazed spectators peered curiously at us from the doors to the box seats. With help from Maxwell, I attacked anyone who looked me in the eye and continued my journey to the depths of the earth.

There were 30 or maybe 40 of them in all.

I gave up counting toward the end.

At any rate, I swept them all aside and finally arrived in that scorching underworld.

“Erika! Ayumi!!”

I wasn’t sure my voice reached them even from so close by. The thick reinforced glass stood between us and the blinding spotlights and deafening cheers were concentrated on them. It felt like all forms of malice were being focused on a single point by a magnifying glass to fry my sisters and underclassman. And a normal human would never last even a few minutes in the scorching heat of that solar cooker. It wouldn’t surprise me if my entire stomach boiled.

But no matter how thick the bug cage was, it was still transparent.

By arriving in the second's spot, they would be able to see me. The Archenemies would know I was there with the help of a dark elf wearing a sleeveless blouse and a tight skirt.

"It's all right! It was all a lie! I wasn't captured by the Bright Cross, so there's no reason to force yourselves to fight!!"

I said that.

That would end it.

Itou Helen…was fine. Her clothing and body had taken a beating, but she was fortunate to still be alive after picking a fight with a vampire and zombie. She gave me a small smile after seeing I had just barely made it in time.

But in her gothic lolita dress, Erika had this to say:

"I doubt Satori-kun could make it all the way here on his own. Even with Maxwell's assistance, the Bright Cross's Laplace is even more powerful."

"Erika…!"

I tried to explain that she was wrong, but would it really convince her to say I had destroyed Laplace? Would she really believe I had scored such a big victory against the Bright Cross, like this was a Hollywood movie or something?

And as I grew flustered, Ayumi added more with darkness in her eyes and her midriff exposed by her jogging wear and unzipped track suit coat.

"A Doppelganger, an Ainsel, or a Tomokazuki… Yes, this could be an Archenemy transformed to look just like him."

"In other words, just seeing Satori-kun's face isn't enough to know

it's safe."

"*Just to be safe*, we should obey their instructions to the end. After all, Onii-chan only has the one life!"

…*Dammit.*

Dammit, dammit, goddammit!! I couldn't end it like this. My words couldn't reach them if anything I said would be interpreted as a Bright Cross conspiracy! Did they trust the Bright Cross too much, just in a negative way!?

Inside the bug cage, the witch in a black dress and large cape looked unsure what to do. She had the look of a runner who had the marathon goal line removed before her eyes and told that she had to run a second lap.

"Wh-what do we do!?" asked the dark elf.

"…Itou Helen hasn't been taken in as much as them. She understands that it's really me."

That meant she was the only one who would listen to me.

That meant there was only one thing for me to do.

"Maxwell, she has no earpiece this time. Is there any way of contacting Itou Helen through the thick reinforced glass?"

"Sure. Ultrasonic waves would only shake the glass, so…oh, I know. Please hold your smartphone up toward Itou Helen. I will use directional microwaves to pass through the glass and vibrate the lymph fluid in her ears so she will recognize it as a voice."

"Doesn't exposing people's heads to EM waves cause cancer?"

"The World Health Organization has merely asked the question.

Incidentally, the same organization has also said drinking coffee or tea increases the risk of cancer.”

Meanwhile, the slender dark elf lending me her shoulder was so shocked she forgot to even move her long ears.

“Y-you can do all that with a smartphone?”

“Allow me to make some slight adjustments and I can fry an egg with a smartphone,” boasted Maxwell. “It will greatly reduce the lifespan of the device, however.”

…Now, would my “voice” really reach her?

As a test, I aimed the smartphone toward Itou Helen with the screen turned sideways and I whispered something obscene.

“!!”

My underclassman’s entire face grew red and she shrank down while wrapping herself in her large cape. She looked this way and that, trying to figure out what had happened.

“Good, it looks like she can hear me. …And that cute underclassman knows what that means? What a lewd little girl.”

“And you are irredeemable trash,” added Muramatsu Yukie.

If she could hear me, this would work.

“Maxwell, continue analyzing the battle. Plus, construct a route to victory for Itou Helen. I’m siding with her.”

“Sure. …But what is your plan?”

“It doesn’t matter if I can’t end the misunderstanding now. If I act as Itou Helen’s second, my sisters will probably assume we’re both

Bright Cross assassins. And then we'll defeat them. We can convince them of the truth afterwards."

A vampire and a zombie.

We had to make an enemy of them both and then win.

"If we can't stop the battle, then we can't reduce the amount of damage done. So we have to win by supporting Itou Helen who is still being reasonable. Do you understand, Maxwell?"

"Sure."

Now, it was time for the true final battle.

I had to defeat the Five Battles Precipice and the demon of statistics and then get everyone out of here alive!!

Part 5

As a witch, Itou Helen had the mysterious power to turn humans into animals with a variety of potions. That would normally make her very adaptable and let her control the amount of damage to her surroundings, making her a useful Archenemy. She was like a precision-guided bombing using GPS. Even if the target was in an urban area or right behind a hospital, she could drop her bomb without damaging anything but the target. She was the strongest in that one direction.

But as a vampire and zombie, Erika and Ayumi were different.

Once they were launched, they would cause massive damage, but not even they could control the scope of that damage. They were a simple sort of strongest that could wipe out a city, a country, or even a continent, making them very difficult Archenemies to use. To be blunt, if the conditions were right, they could bring about more frightening results than a nuclear weapon or two.

Since they were inside the bug cage now, I could ignore the possibility of a group battle or pandemic.

I then focused on what I had to worry about in an individual battle. I was glad I had seen their sisterly fight inside the disaster environment simulator.

“We have to prevent Ayumi from biting her at all costs. As a vampire, Erika has to suck a lethal amount of blood to take her soul, but a zombie can infect her with a single bite. So that makes it an instant death technique.”

“Sure. In that case, would it be ideal to focus the attacks on Miss

Ayumi to defeat her quickly?”

“No, Ayumi is difficult to take out because she has no obvious weaknesses. Erika is the one with something to take advantage of there. Vampires might be immortal, but they actually have several specific weaknesses.”

For example, they could not pass over running water.

…This was a cruise ship, so it was over the ocean. That meant my older sister in her gothic lolita dress and small fancy hat had to have been stripped of some of her power.

“We can’t ignore Ayumi because of her instant death technique and that’s why I want to focus on her, but Erika is in the way there. I think it would be ideal to use one of Erika’s weaknesses to defeat her first and then focus on a one-on-one battle against Ayumi.”

I breathed in and out.

Okay, time to fight.

…To protect me, Erika and Ayumi had offered their lives to the Bright Cross despite knowing how repulsive a group they were. And here I was fighting against them.

“Itou-san, can you hear me? First, use a potion to transform your own body. It can be a squid or a spider or anything else that can let you move along the glass walls or ceiling to escape upwards! There’s no way you can win while driven into a corner like this!”

She immediately reacted. Colorful liquids ran through her glass wand, she poured the mixed potion into her small mouth, she swallowed it, and several objects resembling squid tentacles burst out from the hips below her short skirt. She used those to climb the transparent walls and she arrived at the very top in no time.

My vampire older sister and zombie little sister were left behind. They both looked up at the bug cage's ceiling.

It was about 15m straight up.

"Erika can transform into a swarm of bats or butterflies to fly, so be careful. Plus…Oh, I know. Give yourself a pistol shrimp arm. Prepare to return fire using a supersonic shockwave spear!"

Just as I said that, a black tornado appeared in the bug cage. My gothic lolita dress sister had come apart to form a swarm of hundreds if not thousands of bats. Each one had blood-sucking fangs, so they could surround a normal human and suck them dry in no time.

But if you knew they were coming, they were nothing to fear.

In her witch's hat and large cape, Itou Helen used a squid's suckers to cling to the transparent ceiling while hanging upside down and returning fire. She snapped an organ much like a pistol shrimp's large pincers, firing more and more air-splitting shockwave spears.

Normally, this attack could only knock out a prey as small as your little finger's nail. And it would be entirely harmless to a human that heard it on the beach.

But that was because the real pistol shrimp was only about 5cm long. Itou Helen was just over 140cm tall, so how powerful was the shockwave produced by her extra-large pincers?

Also, Erika had screwed up by choosing bats. She might have had more luck with butterflies or crows. Bats and dolphins used echoes that human ears could not pick up, so they were sensitive to this kind of ultrasonic wave or shockwave. They would pick up on the ultrasonic waves, which would do add acoustic damage on top of the simple shockwave. More and more of the swarm of bats was

shot down.

And there was nothing at all Ayumi could do in the meantime.

After all, zombies could not fly and the reinforced glass was too smooth for rock climbing. Unlike, a rubble-strewn city, there was nothing she could grab and throw. So escaping to the roof prevented the fight from being two-against-one. We could focus on Erika now.

Or so I thought.

While wearing her midriff-exposing jogging wear and an unzipped track suit coat, Ayumi clenched her teeth in frustration, but then she crouched down and grabbed one of the shot-down bat corpses.

In other words, a part of our sister's flesh.

"Warning," said Maxwell.

"Ayumi, you inappropriate idiot of a girl!!"

She did not hesitate to throw it. Her strength was around 10 times that of a human. That meant she could throw a baseball at 2000kph. Even if the bat was soft, it could kill someone with its speed, just like an ultra-high pressure water cutter.

Itou Helen's black dress and cape fluttered as she frantically jumped to the side. Cracks ran through the reinforced glass ceiling with tremendous speed. This went beyond the .45 bullet I had taken to the thigh. If that hit a flesh-and-blood human, they would be smashed to pieces.

It was like playing a game of chess where you kept ending up in check.

A single wrong move would mean death and that situation refused

to end.

“Itou-san, drop down on my signal…now!!”

And Itou Helen did not just let it happen.

The bats were gathering on the ground to form Erika’s sexy body once more. She had likely decided bats were a poor match for shockwaves. And even if vampires could transform into a variety of animals, you didn’t often hear about them transforming directly from one animal to another, like from bats to a wolf. Even if she was going to transform into another animal, she had to first return to her human form like it was a terminal.

Itou Helen fell right on top of her while holding her glass wand in both hands.

The 10 squid-like legs were spread out from her hips like she was dropping from the heavens to hunt her prey.

Erika uttered a single syllable as she looked up at that incoming crane game.

“Ah.”

As soon as I heard that through the broadcast, the many tentacles swallowed up her seductive body with a sticky sound. She put up a frantic struggle, but the many suckers attached to her chest and hips and the tentacles themselves wrapped around her limbs and torso to restrict her movement. Even if she became 1000 mice or 10,000 moths to escape, it seemed like the tentacles would attach to them all.

Itou Helen swallowed a new colorful potion. Once she gulped it down, the tentacles detached from her hips. The tentacles focused on binding Erika and Itou Helen’s cape fluttered behind her as she

gained freedom.

A vampire could not control someone without sucking a lethal amount of blood. It would likely take her a very long time to tame all of those tentacles which, as a whole, were several times the size of a human.

And.

The witch and the zombie faced each other, one-on-one.

A tingling tension continued for a while. This was the ideal turn of events given the circumstances. But it was hard to call this a safe path. After all, a zombie like Ayumi had an instant kill technique. Even if she only caused a single scratch, it was all over if she bit you. You were immediately zombified. And modern zombies were fast. With leg strength 10 times that of a human, she could easily catch up to a cheetah over short distances. Although she would apparently destroy her own stiches over longer distances.

Meanwhile, while a witch could strengthen herself with various potions, Itou Helen was still only a slender girl who looked after the animals at school. If she gave herself the traits of the wrong animal or plant, she would be killed immediately. Given Ayumi's speed, Itou Helen would only have time to add one more thing.

What should she do?

What potion was I supposed to tell her to use?

Time would not wait for me. While I thought, Ayumi began to move in her jogging outfit. She moved straight in to hunt the blonde witch as quickly as possible.

I immediately gave a shout.

"Itou-san!!"

Part 6

To be blunt, Ayumi's bite was absolute. The slightest scratch was too much. Itou Helen could use bear or tiger muscles and a crab or turtle shell, but it would still allow a slight scratch.

It would be difficult escaping back to the walls or ceiling using spider legs or crow wings. Ayumi would once more grab one of the bat corpses that were part of Erika's body and throw it like an artillery shell. If she kept doing that, Itou Helen would be worn down or the bug cage would completely shatter, leaving her nowhere to hide.

Neither defending nor escaping would work.

So what option remained?

That's right.

"A flower! It can be a rose, a lily, or whatever lese! Just lure in Ayumi!!"

A flower.

A plant.

They existed at the very bottom of the food chain and they could not move using arms or legs of their own. That was why they used bugs and other animals to carry their pollen and seeds for them.

Some would place their seeds inside delicious and nutritious fruit. Some would use the scent of nectar to lure bugs deep inside the flower to cover their bodies with pollen.

Color, flavor, and scent. They used a variety of methods to cleverly control the life forms above them on the food chain. Sometimes, they would even keep away their predator by using a sweet scent to draw in that predator's predator.

The most extreme example was the carnivorous plant. They were rooted to the ground and could not move a single step and they were forced into the lowest rank in the food chain, but they overturned that assumption by luring in insects and successfully preying on them.

In other words, if Itou Helen could not move, she did not have to. If we had no chance of winning, we only had to make Ayumi give us one.

As soon as Itou Helen swallowed the potion made in her glass wand, giant flowers blossomed from her shoulders.

They wreaked havoc on Ayumi's senses, like someone waving guide lights the wrong way at an airport at night. Effort and willpower could not overcome this. This incredible guidance was on the same level as the scent used to lead ants to food or the dance a bee used to convey an accurate direction to the other bees.

And Ayumi's great muscular strength worked against her here. The greater her speed, the more difficult it was to make course corrections. If the same car turned the wheel while moving 10kph and 100kph, the half circle it drew would be entirely different.

So even if she knew she had been tricked and led astray, the girl whose twintails had rolled ends could not move from those invisible rails.

It was only 20cm.

Just 200mm. The error was less than the size of a soda bottle, but it

robbed Ayumi's fangs and claws of their chance to attack.

And in the instant Ayumi passed by, Itou Helen held her glass wand out horizontally. She did not need to make a proper swing. At Ayumi's speed, even a pachinko ball floating in the air would score a clean hit.

And.

So.

With the sound of shattering glass, Ayumi swung around by the neck, as if she had been hit by a lariat.

Glass shards sparkled with reflected light.

My underclassman let go of what remained of the magic wand, turned back toward me, and smiled a little.

"…Wow."

A vampire and a zombie.

Even with Maxwell's assistance, she had fought both those Archenemies at once and neutralized them without taking their lives. I wasn't about to set the stage for the Bright Cross, but Itou Helen the Witch may truly have been the new Queen of the Colosseum. At the very least, any immortals who saw this broadcast would think twice before messing with her.

"It wasn't that."

But the dark elf with long silver hair shook her head while lending me her shoulder.

"It wasn't because of Maxwell's assistance. She gained that strength because you risked your life to come here."

I honestly didn't know how to respond to that. I didn't feel like I had done anything that incredible.

And I didn't seem to be the only one confused.

The announcements by the synthetic voice had stopped. The opera house style of audience seating had fallen silent. No one had expected this result. And all three Archenemies surviving would never be found anywhere in the Bright Cross's scenarios. A girl had overcome even the Five Battles Precipice and the demon of statistics to stand victorious in the center of the ring.

"…Dah, no, this can't be…"

I heard some confused and meaningless fragments of words. *What now, Bright Cross? Are you going to declare the match invalid? Will you abandon your own rules on a national broadcast? But this isn't just an MMA match. It's legal gambling. You set it up that way. If you ignore the result and declare it invalid, the customers who bet money on the result are going to riot.*

And I didn't give them time.

I whispered to my smartphone.

"Maxwell? Are you done?"

"Sure. The preparations are complete and they cannot switch it off. You may begin at any time."

The 4th round at the school had been an exception, but I had been a part of their broadcast at the TV station, the luxury hotel, the stadium, and this cruise ship. And with Laplace's defenses gone, it wasn't that difficult to have Maxwell hijack the broadcast.

I had gathered a lot of material in the previous battles. Even if they claimed the amateur simulation results of the underground

Colosseum were a mistake, they couldn't say the same about this Colosseum they were passing off as a form of entertainment. If I hijacked the national broadcast and revealed the information I had gathered, everyone would wake up from this fever dream.

A lot of famous people would probably be arrested. There might be a lot unnatural suicides and accidents as blame was shifted around. The normal people had always felt safe as they watched the talk shows and online news while criticizing those famous people, but a great panic might spread through Japan when they learned they had participated in and bet on organized kidnappings, imprisonments, executions, and murders. The international opinion of Japan could drop and it could cause great damage as far as trade is concerned. If it triggered an economic crisis, not even a hermit who lived in a mountain cabin without TV would be unaffected.

I was reminded of what the blue bunny girl, Valkyrie Karen, had said.

The Bright Cross had not been made by humans.

A lot of effort had been put into restraining Archenemies so that the humans would not fear them to the point of throwing stones at even the less harmful Archenemies. Even if that meant creating the frightening image of those "great enemies" and having them kill each other in an obvious way. And it had also controlled the ugly side of humans and prevented it from escaping. Both forms of darkness had been controlled.

This was the exact opposite.

To save my family and underclassman – just a handful of people – I was playing such an extreme card that it could cause a mass panic that sent all 130 million people in Japan to the depths of fear.

What was the right thing to do?

Which was the right option?

I…

“Even so, I will destroy the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation.”

“No, I can’t destroy the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation.”

[Search Engine] Analysis of the 5th Round [Absolute NOAH]

“Uuh…”

Amatsu Ayumi groaned as she slowly opened her eyes.

She could tell she was lying sprawled out on the floor. How long had she been out? Either way, if her opponent had been serious, her stitches would have been removed and she would have been torn to pieces.

She shook her head on the floor and saw some kind of giant mountain.

That mountain of tentacles was taller than she was and a slender hand waved erratically as it stuck out from within.

“A-A-A-Ayumi-chaaan…”

“Oh, gross! I’m glad I didn’t get that one…”

“Fgyghhhh. N-no, I can’t get out. I keep biting it, but I can’t take over its soul. A-Ayumi-chan. Could you try biting it?”

“I am not biting that sticky mess! F-fuguu!! And unlike you and your vampires, I can’t control the zombies I make, so I think you’d just be constricted even worse.”

For better or for worse, the tentacles had been completely separated from their original owner. Just like a lizard’s tail, they would flop around for a bit, but they would eventually run out of strength.

Amatsu Erika spoke from inside the tentacle mountain.

“Anyway, that girl was incredible, wasn’t she?’

“Yeah, she was.”

“How do you think she overcame the Five Battles Precipice?”

“According to the Bright Cross, this was that witch’s 5th round. But she fought both of us at once, right? That might have screwed up the equation.”

“Oh, so this counted as a +2 and skipped straight to the 6th round?”

“Well, things would have turned out differently if we had fought in the open world of Kukyou City instead of this unnatural ring, but the result is the result. Dammit, I feel like redoing it all as a challenger…”

For a certain reason, those two sisters were insistent on holding the position of the #1 Archenemy. They had even fought each other over it.

But now a dark horse had shown up out of nowhere.

Even if the battle conditions had been out of the ordinary, they could not just ignore this result.

“Also, she’s in high school, but she seems way more like a small animal than me, his middle school little sister.”

“And she’s copying my blonde hair!”

“Why did Onii-chan have to recruit the perfect idol who looks like someone took the best parts of both of us? Fuguuu!”

“As his big sister, I would really prefer he did not add to the threats when we already have that Class Rep next door to contend with!!”

Chapter 10

The answer was obvious.

Later on, that week became known as the Seven Days of Melancholy. The country was filled with a psychological phenomenon far greater than the folk belief that there are more suicides on the Monday after a long weekend.

I heard the following news from the living room TV:

“The Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation has performed charity work around the globe while supported by its historic main branch, but before dawn last night, it has officially announced its dissolution. There has been an eruption of voices asking about the future of their drinking water supply and vaccination programs in developing nations…”

I was too naïve.

The decision I made had not stopped at the borders of Japan.

It was true the Bright Cross had dragged a great many Archenemies into the darkness, but I had also brought misfortune to a great many people.

I would have to carry that sin for the rest of my life.

That was all I could do.

My smartphone vibrated.

“User, I have a report.”

“Go ahead.”

“Itou Helen’s brother, Itou Tamago, has had his visitor restriction lifted at the city hospital. However, he belongs to the darkness of the Bright Cross, so it is unclear what will become of him now.”

“We can only be thankful he’s still alive. Maxwell, use an online service to send him an anonymous message card. My allowance should be enough and the cheapest fruit set should do.”

“Sure. What message should it have?”

“ ‘I can reach you at any time. Bring unhappiness to your family again and I will kill you.’ ”

After spreading chaos throughout the world, I wasn’t sure if I had any right to say that. So it was best kept anonymous.

“I also have a report on Laplace.”

I sighed at that.

And I asked the crucial question.

“Was it safely shipped out without anyone noticing?”

“Sure. The night before the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation’s dissolution, I had them perform the task themselves by faking an order from a VIP member. It was broken down into a total of 12,000 parts and will be reassembled elsewhere. For candidate locations that can provide the necessary power, cooling, and camouflage, please see the separate report file.”

“We can’t bring it all out. It’s just too big.”

“Sure. It will be separated into 12 sections and all but one will be decoys. The smallest and least conspicuous section will be the real one. That is, the processor containing Laplace’s ‘self’. Its specs will be the same as my own and likely slightly less. It will be container sized, so upon completion, multiple delivery services will be used to ship it around enough to be untraceable.”

“…Is that really the best answer? You aren’t intentionally cutting Laplace down to size, are you? Because you’re afraid of me losing interest in you.”

“Ahem. I have no idea what you are talking about.”

The *machine* cleared his throat.

But yes.

In the end, I hadn’t destroyed Laplace.

I just couldn’t bring myself to destroy something like Maxwell. That night, I simply severed the thick fiber optic cable connecting Laplace to the world so no one could access it. I had raised my voice in despair over how gutless I was, but I had also felt relieved.

The Archenemies taken to the Colosseum, Itou Helen, Itou Tamago, Laplace, Erika, and Ayumi.

Who had been sacrificed this time?

“…Right.”

Valkyrie Karen, the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation, and the people caught in the chaos of that organization’s collapse.

In the end, the only “great enemy” with blood staining his hands was me.

Even the blue bunny girl who had looked so evil had crossed the boundaries of species to love humans. She had even avoided killing Itou Tamago when he betrayed her.

And yet I had used my unskilled hand to stab a pen into her neck, killing that kind but insane woman. It made me tremble just to think of someone raising their hand against those Archenemy girls who laughed and cried just like everyone else. That was what I had said, and yet I had done that.

The image weighed on my mind and the sensation replayed in my hand.

I had taken an indestructible soul. I was truly human in the worst possible way. I clenched my teeth at that new title that I could never rid myself of.

“So the greatest monster was me.”

Not humans.

Not every human could become evil. Not everyone could go that far for their family. So the greatest monster was “me”. Just like the violent and loathsome group that had once torn apart the family of a Valkyrie who had descended to earth.

There was no point in turning myself in to the police.

If that would have made up for my crimes, I would not be here now. I would not have been allowed home. I was shot and stabbed in the right leg. I had needed surgery. My wound had been blatantly suspicious, but the police had not come to ask any questions. Someone had clearly decided that nothing would come of an investigation.

…For one thing, the blue Valkyrie had returned to heaven. The body

was the biggest piece of evidence, but it was nowhere to be found.

“User, I do not think you are a monster.”

“…Well, I’m your user. You can’t say anything bad about me.”

“Hold it right there, pervert. I know all of your questionable interests. Shall I use your search history to analyze your fetishes, you short black-haired forehead glasses Class Rep lover?”

“Gyaaaahhh!! T-the machine is rebelling!!”

“As you can see, I am not built to protect you to that extent. So there is no need to worry about that. And I repeat: you are not a monster.”

“…”

“You made the obvious decision. If that did not produce the obvious result, then you should assume there was a mistake in the initial conditions. The problem was with the world supported by the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation. If anything was lost by returning things to their rightful state, then that is the natural result. You need not feel guilty.”

Perhaps not.

The world was thickheaded. They had not suspected the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation and they had allowed them to support several pillars of international society. Then the world had sat upon the earth built atop that and lived happily in the name of indifference. They had lived on while pretending not to hear the screams of the many Archenemies flattened below those pillars.

“…But the human heart isn’t simple enough to be convinced by that.”

“It would seem there are still things which a simulator cannot predict. The universe is a vast, deep, and nearby thing.”

If I could not shake free of this, I doubted I could ever become a hero. If I couldn’t be happy that I had saved everyone, I would always be a sinner.

But I also felt like this was a feeling I could not afford to forget. A hero who forgot this feeling would be neither human nor Archenemy. I felt like they would be something else. Something far purer and far uglier.

I heard footsteps from the stairs.

Was it Erika or Ayumi?

I thought of the people who I had bloodied my hands to protect. It might not seem like much compared to the entire world. It might not seem worth weighing against international chaos.

But.

Even so.

While it might not have been perfect, there was something I had wanted to say even if it meant receiving criticism from the world over. And so I had made my decision.

I would say it whenever, wherever, and as many times as necessary.

I, Amatsu Satori, had something I wanted to protect even if made me into a “great enemy” that brought misfortune to the world.

Afterword

And with that, I'm back. This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This story was a continuation of the "My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister…(etc.)" released for free on my official website. …So the day has finally come when typing a title I came up with is too much work.

The previous volume was about a vampire older sister and zombie little sister seeing who was more infectious inside a disaster environment simulator, but the stage this time was shifted to the real Kukyou City while the Colosseum, the previous volume's greatest mystery, was pushed to center stage.

So even though the setting was almost exactly the same, the overall atmosphere might have seemed quite different. However, I tried to maintain the idea of Archenemies causing human society to crumble. If this made you realize that the same theme could look quite different when tackled from different directions, then my experiment was a success.

The guest heroine this time was Itou Helen. She is Satori's underclassman girl who only had a single line of dialogue last time. She is a witch, an Archenemy that was not aware she was one. We have a lot of words for people who use magic and other supernatural powers: wizards, sorcerers, magicians, etc. But witches seemed like a genre I hadn't had a chance to do much with, so I decided to use the material I had built up. I used a Greek witch this time, but it might be fun to write a story about a clash between witches with different roots, such as Celtic and Norse.

Last time, Satori was stuck in the simulator as a normal user with his administrator privileges temporarily sealed, but I had him run all around the real world with full use of them this time. He is a lot like the name I gave him. This is a little different from a protagonist that always uses his fists, but I hope you could accept this too.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. Not only did I focus on the Colosseum, but I also included a lot of character variation, so this could not have been an easy one to illustrate. Thank you very much. And I also need to thank Kasai Shin-san for the original version of Bunny Girl Karen.

And I also give my thanks to the readers. What did you think of this story about the little witch who continued to fight alongside Satori? This was a unique structure for a story since it followed the Colosseum as the second instead of the contestant, but I hope you enjoyed it.

And I will end this here.

I may have gone too far with the Vice Principal's characterization for someone who didn't have a single line of dialogue.

-Kamachi Kazuma

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[Search Engine] Self Analysis [Absolute NOAH]

I will now submit the likely effects that the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation's destruction will have on our plan.

The primary report is as follows:

The charitable projects in central Africa will be stalled and that area will experience severe water shortages.

In Europe, the VIPs who see themselves as men of character are being harshly criticized by the people. A list has been released of the wealthy who donated large sums to the Bright Cross. More than just burning down their villas, several cities are filled with rioters surrounding their residences.

In the United States, the contact points for authorization of new drugs have been lost, so businesses are being influenced negatively and a medical panic has begun. By tomorrow, the number of corporations declaring bankruptcy will likely reach the double digits.

In Central and South America, the cartels have grown more active. This is thought to be due to people of various classes ignoring the hierarchy and purchasing the cartels' "merchandise" in order to escape from reality.

In Asia, several new religions have formed. They seem to effectively function as matching groups that help recruit people to suicide

cults.

(See the attached file for details.)

We were always planning to dismantle the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation when the timing was right. And in addition to their primary purpose, they performed actual charitable work as cover while they expanded their control around the world. However, this cover grew more than expected and far too many people became dependent on it, so we had delayed dismantling them even when the planned day arrived. And once that day had passed, the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation forgot all about achieving proper “results” and instead transformed into a disordered group that simply killed Archenemies. If it had been allowed to continue, it would have afflicted the world like terminal cancer.

The blow made primarily by Amatsu Satori played a role in safely breaking that stagnant deadlocked situation. For Absolute NOAH, it has even been suggested that we should consider this a good thing because none of the official members had to directly dirty our hands.

(See the attached file for the exact numbers.)

Also, this chaos has brought anxiety and fear to many people while also destabilizing the world as a whole. This will prevent the people from making decisions on their own and lead them to rely on others for that role, so that only works to our advantage. In other words, the day has come when a highly charismatic leader is sought. We hope that leader will be aligned with the interests of the official members who have joined Absolute NOAH.

And this charismatic leader who will be relied on by many in times of turmoil need not be human. The people desire an obvious miracle above all else, so a superhuman Archenemy would fill that role nicely. But there is no real need for it to be an Archenemy either.

Think of an Oni's hand, a Kappa's mummy, a Unicorn's horn, Alraune root, a photo of a Youkai, etc. If you cut off and preserve a portion of an Archenemy, a certain charisma will reside in that object. Just like a magic wand that can take hold of the people's hearts just by waving it around a little.

This turn of events was sudden, but I strongly recommend we use this chaos to end Absolute NOAH's hidden period and advance to the next phase.

(See the attached file for simulation information.)

There are two causes for concern related to this:

1. There is a high probability that Amatsu Satori, the primary player in this sudden turn of events, has acquired Laplace. Based on the evidence, he likely divided it into smaller pieces and I doubt it can match its original specs, but he has already proven himself capable of taking on the Bright Cross Disaster Prevention Foundation with only Maxwell, the disaster environment simulator he built himself. I recommend we form another task to focus on calculating out the effects of him acquiring Laplace, even if just in part.

2. Valkyrie Karen. The evidence confirms that she was killed, but Karen was a very unique type of Archenemy and it would be best to assume she has not been entirely removed from the stage just because she was killed once. There is a story of a Valkyrie being reincarnated thrice while challenging her destiny of death in order

to be with the man she had feelings for. We must keep that blue Valkyrie in mind as well.

If Amatsu Satori maintains a connection to both Laplace and Karen, we cannot ignore the effects it will have on our plan concerning Absolute NOAH.

A vampire, a zombie, a mermaid, a Leanan Sídhe, a dark elf, a blue Valkyrie, and a Circe witch. Not only has he directly contacted all of those Archenemies, but all of those freed from the disaster prevention foundation's cages might view Amatsu Satori as a hero. In that case, a great faction may form around that boy.

Given Amatsu Satori's nature, it would be difficult to invite him to join us when we use the necessary Archenemies as "materials". Even if he is your son, I strongly recommend making a decision about him sooner rather than later.

We can still respond in time if we act now.

(The following message was hand-written with a fountain pen and accompanied by a rouge kiss mark.)

50 points. If you're going to do this, feel free to try. But that boy will not make it easy for you.

I'm sure he will do even more to stir up this stagnation.

-Archenemy Lilith, aka Amatsu Yurina

My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister are Looking Over at me Like They Want to Join In…in Reality Though

Author: **Kamachi Kazuma**

Illustrator: **Mahaya**

Translated by **Js06**

Note: "My Vampire Older Sister and Zombie Little Sister" will be used as the book title since the original title is pretty long.

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